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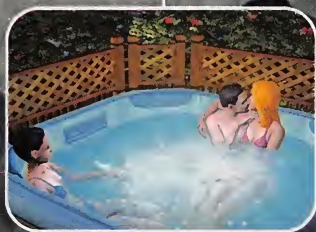
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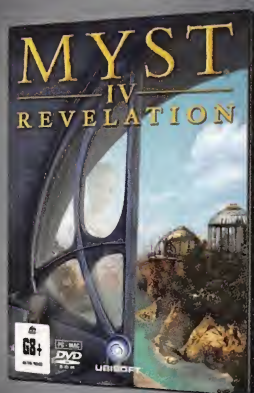
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Where singles click



Cassandra came back to my place after work the other day. She looked smart in her white lab coat and very cute in her dark pigtails. I figured we were perfect for each other.

It was still early evening so I thought I'd impress her by cooking a delicious chili con carne dinner. But first I had to visit the bathroom and clean the toilet. Cassandra sat patiently on the couch while waiting for my return, casually flicking through a book she had pulled from my bookcase.

I finished cooking in no time and placed the meal on the kitchen table. I grabbed a plate and sat down to eat. Cassandra did likewise, but was forced to eat on the couch since I had only one chair in the kitchen. This made conversation somewhat awkward.

We finished eating and I washed up all the plates. Cassandra reclined on the two-seater couch, flicking her pigtails coquettishly (or was it impatiently). I couldn't wait to join her and begin a steamy discussion about chess. But first I had to use the bathroom. And then clean it again.

Back in the living room Cassandra was now channel surfing, presumably in an effort to find something more romantic than the cooking show (or maybe she was growing agitated). As I reached the couch she stood up. I declared my intention with a hug to be closely followed by a peck on the lips, but she slipped out of my grasp and darted to the bathroom.

While I waited, the temptation of a half-filled rubbish bin proved too much: I had to empty it. Walking back inside, I was passed at the front door by a now clearly bored Cassandra Goth. She left without even saying goodbye.

Unfazed by the failure of the whole night, I took a scrubbing brush to the now soiled toilet with zest. By midnight it was spotless.

Yes, I've been playing quite a lot of Sims 2 this month.

The response to my editorial in PCPP#104, "The Budget Curse", was incredible. Save for Anthony's review of Invisible War, I can't recall any article we've published that has generated such overwhelming feedback. Your correspondence ranged across angry tirades against piracy, blasé support for piracy, despair at the ever-increasing system requirements for new release games, and a good old-fashioned nostalgia for old games.

Our reaction here has been to embrace the budget game by launching a brand new appendix to our regular reviews section. On page 90 you'll see the first of our budget reviews - bite-sized critiques of the reissued old games or new titles at (in most cases) bargain prices. Everything in this section is under fifty bucks and there are some great games to be found. They may even run properly on your PC.

It's going to be filled with Sims 2 expansion packs soon, don't worry about that.

David Wildgoose,
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"With so many WWII shooters concentrating on teamwork, Mortyr II's solo gameplay is a welcome return to tense one-man-army action."
- PC Zone



Ego-Shooter achtung!

"Graphically, Mortyr II looks set to be quite spiffing actually, thanks to Mirage's home made Argon engine that does a fine job of replicating the look and feel of WWII battlefields."
- PC Zone

One man's war against the axis of evil



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Dear PCPP



INBOX

WRITE TO THE INBOX AT:

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I think it is unfair to say you benchmarked every ATI card last month, don't you? You only testes (sic) half the RADEON series.

Nic Italiano

Looks like we, er... dropped the ball there.

I'm glad that you put it back in. I was still playing with it.

Mally99

Gee, you must be tired.

I actually believe that I was a Uboat commander in a past life.

Frank Slavich

Nurse!

I believe other PCPP readers would be interested in reading about how to back up games.

Michael Zhang

I'm sure they would...



My one dilemma is will I have preordered enough chocolate to bribe the boss for some time off?

Mark Honnibal

This boss would like to request Cadbury's Cookies & Cream.

I'm just a boy that wants a PC gaming Expo.

Ian Adams

NerdFest?

What's a good game maker that can make games like Half-Life 2 and you don't need to do any programming.

Natty Nick

You will be able to design your own maps with the HL2 editing tools.

"Console Port PowerPlay" is a horrible name, isn't it?

Steve Walley

Yes, and never mention it again.

I wouldn't mind owning the patent on the whole shooting-kaboodle.

Cameron Fare

But you'd use that power for good not evil, yeah?

The people who buy budget games don't know how 2 pirate so they buy them.

Sean Pocock

Obviously.

THE BUDGET CURSE

I read your editorial in this month's issue of PCPP (number 104) about big PC releases not staying in the top selling lists for a decent amount of time, especially compared to consoles. I've been thinking about this myself and have come to the conclusion that the main reason is due to the open architecture of PCs, as opposed to the closed one of a console. When a person buys a console game, there is only one thing they need to worry about: whether the game is good or not. They already know that, if the game is of quality, it will run perfectly on their machine. They don't need to worry about having to upgrade their system in order to get the best performance or so that it's simply playable. They have no need to worry if the game won't like their particular set-up. Nor do they need to worry about buggy initial releases with patches they'd rather wait for before purchasing the game. And finally, they don't need to worry if their internet connection is fast enough to play online, or if they are up to date with their mods.

As we well know, it's very different on the PC. Not only do we have to worry about the above mentioned factors, many PC gamers will wait to see if a game will get a strong MOD following before purchasing. Of course, piracy is also an issue but it relates to the open architecture of the PC. For example, say your friend lends you a console game or you rent one from the video store. You go home, play it and think "Hey, this is awesome! I'll have to buy a copy for myself!" as due to the hardware design of the console, you can't simply just burn and play.

However on the PC it's much different. Your friend will lend you a game and you'll think "Hey, this game is awesome! I'll have to burn a copy of it for myself right this second!" if you haven't already downloaded it off the internet. There is little risk of getting caught, it's simple, and anyone with a basic computer set-up can do it.

I love the fact that we can upgrade our computers, tweak them to our best efforts and get access to the latest technology. I love that we can expand the games we purchase by downloading additions from the internet which can make the game better than the original release. However, these things may also be a contributing factor against new releases consistently selling.

Andrew Gray

I suppose in Australia there are only two kind of PC gamers: those with a Pentium 1 who buy C&C: Red Alert for \$10; and those with the latest gizmos who buy Thief 3 for \$100. And I am definitely not rich enough to be the latter.

William Hartanto

I don't think piracy is to blame for the lousy sales of PC games however much the retailers will try to convince you of it. The real problem is that the hardware requirements of these games are getting too much.

Also the simple fact is that games are also priced outrageously. New release games used to debut at around \$79.95 each, now the publishers have become greedy and the prices increased to \$99.95 to \$109.95. People would rather pay \$49.95 each when they have the computer to run them. The publishers and retailers have to remember that people can't afford to pay that much on one PC game, especially not the market they are targeting - the 18-25 year olds. Are we getting to the stage where every time you want to play a new PC game you have to upgrade your computer?

The publishers need to realise, however good the game is, we're paying firstly \$100 for the game plus up to \$3000 for the hardware necessary to run it! People started losing faith

in PC games when they started realising that you only pay \$30 for your Xbox and \$89.95 per game!

Admiral Thrawn

Thanks to everyone who wrote in about this issue. It certainly made for some interesting reading. The three letters above represent the recurring themes in almost everyone's correspondence. Now, what about the solutions?

GET THE FULL-BLOWN

In response to Bennett Ring's annoyance (PCPP#103) to the lettering at the end of a model number (SE, XT, LE etc), I remembered my recent graphics situation. About six months ago, I decided that I would upgrade the slow SiS Video Chipset on my Pentium III computer, so it would be able to perform basic gaming tasks and play old games at high speed. Off I went to the North Rocks Computer Market to purchase a Powercolor Radeon 9200SE for \$85. I was dazzled by the enormous 128MB of video memory, the DVI compatibility and the TV Out option, and for \$85 I thought it was a great deal. What I didn't realise, however, that the SE Version was in fact not a Special Edition, but the Slow Edition, with the memory bus brought down from 128-bits to a measly 64-bits. Okay, I could cope with the graphics card, but with all this cash lying around, I thought, why not get the full-blown 9200? This time, I decided to search on eBay and to my surprise I found it. When the auction ended at an expensive \$134.50 including postage I thought this would have to be good, but when it arrived it wasn't what I expected - I could only squeeze another 1000 2001SE 3DMarks.

I searched on the Internet for an explanation and found some terrible news: certain editions of the Radeon 9200 also come with a 64-bit memory bus like the 9200SE, even though they are thought to be faster. The only way to distinguish it is to see if it is a low profile (9200SE with 64-bit bus), strange extended profile (9200 with 64-bit bus) or the massive full height edition (9200 with 128-bit bus).

It seems that it is getting more and more confusing when buying a graphics card, and I can't wait for the day when ATI and NVIDIA stop this lettering thing. Thanks for your article, PCPowerPlay, and I look forward to reading more soon.

Alexander Loder

SE apparently stands for Syntax Error.

GNAWED AT BY MICE

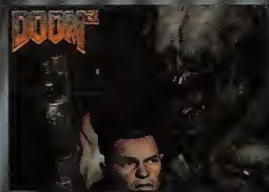
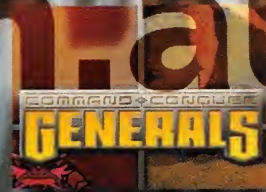
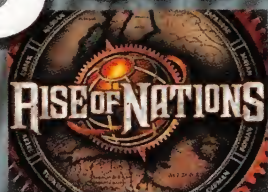
After having a joyful read of PCPP#100 I couldn't help looking at the competition page with a Commodore 64 up for grabs. Even though I had never heard of one until then I couldn't help wanting one. Sadly I couldn't even guess the names of the games that I had to name.

Then on a beautiful Saturday morning I traveled to a market stall and to my shock I found a C64 for sale for only \$15, so I whipped out the wallet and got it. For the rest of the day I sat and marveled at its beauty. I plugged in the disk drive and the joystick that came with it and was shocked that the joystick cable had been gnawed at by mice so I was unable to move in the downward direction when playing Pacman. After many sunsets I finally found a decent game that didn't need a joystick. This game went by the name of Double Dragon. Since my discovery many people stand and laugh at my historical beast. These people should kneel before it and appreciate its retro-ness for it is the ancient of gaming and has revolutionised the way we play. What I'm trying to say is NEVER FORGET THE MIGHTY COMMODORE 64.

Jack Upton

Words to live by, Jack.

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Insight



D & D ONLINE

Wizards of the Sword Coast

ATARI ANNOUNCES D&D FLAVOURED RTS, RPG AND MMO. TCB JOINS THE ACRONYM PARTY...

No RPG special would be complete without a look in the direction of Dungeons & Dragons, but sadly Atari had no respect for our arbitrary schedule of special features and have only recently announced the three games they are crafting from the dungeonus-stuff.

We scrambled to get a decent preview for each game but they were just too early to give them the full treatment so we decided to go with this sneak peek as well as share our appreciation of how well Wizards and Atari have gotten their acts together to really milk D&D in the wake of the Eberron release.

Neverwinter Nights 2

After the success of the original, a sequel was about as surprising as an Orc with poor dental hygiene. The surprise came in the developer.

This new trip to Neverwinter is being DM'ed by newcomers Obsidian Entertainment (which is currently developing KOTOR2, and which contains a fair whack of the talent behind such games as Icewind Dale and Planescape Torment).

While details are sketchy, Obsidian CEO Feargus Urquhart says that, "A lot of us at Obsidian really want to take the story in a different direction. We've been talking about old school RPGs a lot lately like Ultima

IV. The world in Ultima IV was almost a character in itself and the player wasn't just trying to gain the next level, they had a bigger mission than that. So, we are going to really focus on how the story and the world intertwine to bring both of them to life."

Once again, players will start from first level and slowly climb to the heights of power in Neverwinter, and Urquhart says that a big part of the story will revolve around player strongholds, which means we get to be wealthy land owners. Naturally, the game will also update all of the digital DM tools that turned NWN from a neat CRPG game and into a staging ground for thousands of adventures.

In the trio of Atari's games NWN 2 is very much the bridge between the new and old. It keeps the type of gameplay and Forgotten Realms setting we're used to from Baldur's Gate and NWN, while it adds some old-school charm and some new-school toys.

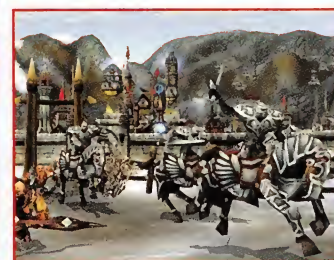
With the RTS and online game, Atari and Wizards are very much getting into renovating mode. Both games take place in the new, more hip, grittier and ironic setting that is Eberron. To add a little more "Dr. Livingstone" intrigue to proceedings the games are also both set on the largely undocumented jungle continent of Xen'drik.



NEVER WINTER NIGHTS 2



D & D ONLINE



DRAGONSHARD

Dragonshard

In Liquid's Dragonshard, the RTS, players have to forge into the lost continent to find a fallen Dragonshard (which is the equivalent of magical uranium, capable of powering massive devices or causing massive destruction). There are three playable sides, with a fourth that's there just to spice up the race.

Dragonshard shakes up standard the RTS formula in a number of ways, which pretty neatly parallel how Eberron shakes up what you expect from D&D.

In Dragonshard, players fight both above and below ground in two very different ways; with the surface being the domain of squads and RTS action, while below is where a smaller band of character-like elites creep monsters, find treasure, disarm traps and generally get all D&D-like.

Even the resource system is different and more Eberron. Players don't have a base; they have a walled city and generate cash via taxes collected from the buildings they erect, while their troops hunt fragments of the Dragonshard for energy.

Even units get a revamp, with individual units not necessarily having classes, but with squads taking on the characteristics of the character class of their leader.

D&D Online makes even more of a statement.

D&D Online

Everyone knows that the likes of EverQuest and Ultima Online came from the minds of people who played too much D&D. Turbine's new game thumbs its nose at the old-school interpretation and presents the new a more stylised and slashing incarnation of D&D.

It combines RPG the rules that form the core of the pen-and-paper game with action elements that only a computer games allows. For example, you can actually dodge attacks like you would in an FPS and it's only if a blow lands then you go to the "to hit versus armour class" stuff.

When a fighter has a +5 base attack then it means that he can string together five-hit combos with some deft mouse-work. Left click attacks, right defends. Combat feats give you new action abilities as well as

stat bonuses and so on. In other words, fighting classes offer real action. If that's not your cup of tea, then other classes focus on other aspects of the game. Thieves can climb walls and traps are actually an elaborate encounter of their own.

Maybe the biggest change is that players only get rewarded for completing quests and actually having adventures. There's no spawn camping here, my friends.

This is possible because Turbine is taking the notion of instanced dungeons to a new height, even generating the wilderness between encounters.

With one central city, a few hundred players per server and this instancing, Turbine is looking for a more intimate and unique experience, figuring that in most MMORPG, for the most part, you just get dull travel zones and a vast number of strangers.

Aren't Parties Meant to have Four?

With NWN2, Dragonshard and D&D Online Atari has put together a great adventuring party looking for your gold. There's a game that appeals to your RPG diehards looking for something new yet familiar, a game well positioned to introduce new people to Eberron in one of the PC's most popular genres and you get an action game that stays true to the community roots of dungeon crawling and dragon slaying.

Even if the sheer amount of experience point floating around Obsidian, Liquid and Turbine can't guarantee great games, you still have to admire their strategy.

Eberron: Funking Up the Fantasy

Eberron is an odd setting, one that combines a pulp-noir feel with your standard D&D conventions. What you get is a tension that is much more modern and interesting than the straight-laced fantasy worlds that we've seen D&D traffic in the past. This is a place of magical mass transit rail systems and skyscraper castles. It's a place where even lawful good organisations play in the shades of grey and detective agencies sound like a great place to find half-elf rogues. This is still recognisably a D&D setting, but if Forgotten Realms is Luke Skywalker then Eberron is Han Solo (but only when he shoots first).



NEVER WINTER NIGHTS 2



Act of War

TIMOTHY C.BEST MEETS THE MAN BUSY AUTHORIZING URBAN WAR

Act of War is an upcoming military RTS with a twist: it might actually have a decent storyline. The Act of War crew hasn't just hired a writer but they've gone to the best-seller list to do it. Former Air Force Captain Dale Brown has a string of popular military aviation hits including *Flight of the Old Dogs*, *The Tin Man* and *Warrior Class*, with his books being read by 11 million people across 70 countries.

You can tell why this guy is earning the big bucks when you read the back story to this particular War on Terror game. In Act of War there is a whole conspiracy involving a huge oil consortium who manipulates terrorists to jack up their stocks. You gotta love that. People who want to pummel terrorists get their wish, while people who blame oil barons for the whole War on Terror get to stick it to those bastards as well.

Eugen Systems and Dale Brown are working on the Act of War game and novel at the same time and Brown not only cooked up the plot for the game but is also consulting on military procedure.

If you figured that Act of War was going down the realism route then you'd be right.

While the game is set about five years into the

future, and features some near-future gadgets like basic remote drones and simple exo-skeletons, it focuses more on the military hardware that we know and love as well as realistic big-city locations, explosions and emergency personnel.

The realistic urban setting also adds new gameplay elements. For one, players will go indoors as well as out as their forces liberate buildings and then set them up as urban strong-points. Of course, the deformable cityscape means that troops in such a strong point just become a different type of target.

Beyond that, both sides will be able to capture POWs, as a source of both cash and information. There will be 15 missions in all, ranging from downtown London to the Russian tundra and the deserts of Egypt. The single player game is all about anti-terror forces, but the tools of terror are available for multiplayer skirmishes.

In either mode, Act of War gives you the ability to zoom from a classic top-down view right in to street level and, while we can only wonder how you'd manoeuvre anything with your face in the wreckage, by George it looks good.

Brown is obviously impressed by the game technology, saying, "Novels are about people, and most times the cast of characters is small and you have enough room to describe relatively small snippets of their lives - the reader's imagination fills in the rest. Not so in Act of War. You will find yourself interacting with a world that spans continents, locations, implements, and personalities - it's a universe that would make most readers' heads spin if you tried to put it all into words."

Act of War isn't due until mid 2005 so there's plenty of time to find out whether the quality of the strategy matches the quality of the head spinning.



INDUSTRY WATCH

With Timothy C. Best

ACCLAIM HAS FINALLY succumbed to acute money starvation. With debts of over \$100m, the industry veteran will be no more and is headed for liquidation. Founded back in 1987 Acclaim brought us everything from *Revolt* to *Turok* and I, for one, am sad that the last Acclaim game I played was *Alias*. A small ray of light is that Acclaim's street racing game, *Juiced*, won't be caught in the wreckage and is expected on schedule due to some interesting funding arrangements. Where one falls others rise. Developer BreakAway is opening a new Studio in Austin Texas (a place where Acclaim had a strong developer presence) and it will be headed up by Mike McShaffry who is hot off working on *Thief: Deadly*

Shadows at Ion Storm. Interestingly enough, Midway, which appears to be making a come back, has also announced that it's going with a new Austin studio. Maybe it's a cosmic balance thing. In further positive news, a market research firm, Screen Digest has indicated that the online PC gaming will almost double its market in the west by 2007. As good as that news is for MMORPG makers, it won't change the fate of Codemaster's *Dragon Empires* which has been axed. No knights were responsible; the UK developer says technical issues killed this beast. Still on MMORPGs, Alchemic Dreams has hired Gary Gygax, one of the guys behind the original D&D pen-

and-paper game, to help write live content for its stable of games including *A Tale in the Desert*, *Necron*, *Project Entropia* and *Light & Dark*. That means that Gygax will be a busy fella, especially with Gary Gygax's *Legendary Adventures Online* on the way. Switching from MMOGs, but keeping with the hiring theme, the creator of the *Desert Combat BF1942* mod, Trauma Studios, has been picked up by DICE so that folks there can be paid for their work on the *Battlefield* series. Way to go lads. On a more general industry note, the makers of several of the leading flavours of Linux have all decided to agree on a standard to stop the platform fragmenting and to steal the thunder from Microsoft's anti-

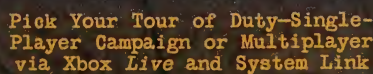
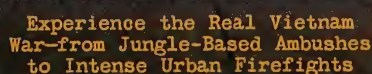
open source ad campaign. Game servers of the world unite! Other interesting tid-bits include revelations by EA that it's going to make a bigger push to get mobile (phone) gaming going, which is bound to cement its empire even further, and that it's research into next-gen console development point to costs being two to three times greater than they are now. Hopefully that equals more first-run games for us. Finally, a new paper has been released by the Entertainment and Leisure Software Association called *Chicks and Joysticks: An Exploration of Women and Gaming*. Grrl gaming is starting to gather momentum but ... with only 10% of developers being of fairer sex things probably won't be changing too quickly.

MEN OF VALOR

SHEPARD
DEAN
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AUSTRALIAN GAMEPRO

OCTOBER 2004

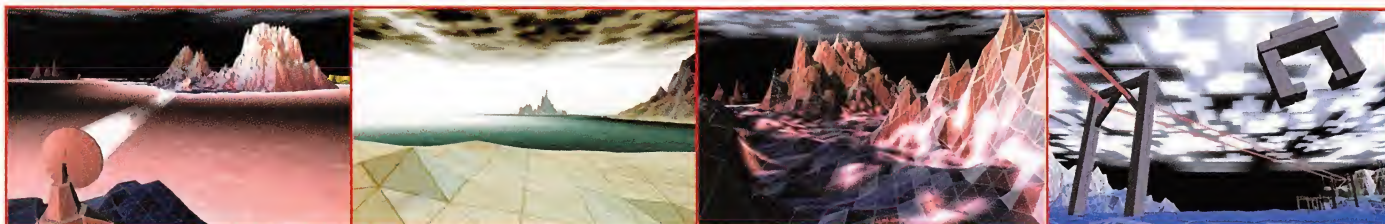


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THE ONE TO WAIT FOR

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The Origin of Spacemen

INTROVERSION SPEAKS UP ABOUT ITS NEW RETRO RTS. DAVID WILDGOOSE REVEALS HIS INNER GEEK...

You may know Introversion from its debut title, the hacker simulation Uplink. Its novel premise and elegant execution combined to make the shareware game one of the sleeper hits of recent years. It also earmarked Introversion as an imaginative studio prepared to take risks free from the conformist tyranny of the industry's major publishers.

Darwinia is the small team's second title and it displays the same sense of adventure and creative verve we witnessed in Uplink. It also shows a developer in love with gaming history and culture.

"I guess we're all a bit geeky at heart," says Thomas Arundel, speaking on behalf of the whole Introversion team. By way of example, Arundel cites the occasion on which Darwinia was originally conceived:

"I remember that one meeting a couple of years ago, Chris [Delay, Lead Developer] came sat down and said, 'Andy [Bainbridge, Co-Developer] and I have come up with an interesting idea for a game based on the latest graphics cards. Since the polygon count is now getting into the millions, if you paint a 2D sprite onto the polygon, you can have millions of sprites on screen simultaneously. This means you can have mega battle scenes!' So that's how it started... the idea was to have huge scale battles on screen."

Since then the game has morphed to become something resembling Cannon Fodder and Syndicate (two classic from the early 90s, for those up the back) meets Command & Conquer with a retro theme, to borrow Arundel's own description.

The plot involves Dr Sepulvader, a failed console manufacturer, creating a digital world called Darwinia through connecting up all the unsold units of his Protologic 68000 games machine. Things of course go pear-shaped and you're brought in to bring the infrastructure back on-line, fight back the red virii that are slowly enveloping Darwinia and save those cute

green stickmen - the Darwinians.

Sepulvader's mad world is chock full of cute references to earlier videogames. From the gorgeous fractals and flat-shaded polygons of the landscapes to a range of enemies including centipedes and space invaders, Introversion has delivered an experience punctuated with geek humour. In the current climate of pseudo-realism and Vietnam, it's the kind of thinking that would have big publishers running a mile.

"I'd say that the only way for an independent developer to exist is to sit at the forefront of game innovation and take those risks," says Arundel.

"By innovation I don't mean figuring out how to up the polygon count by a factor of 10, but coming up with different and unique game mechanisms. Darwinia is quite mainstream in that regard - it's taking game elements that haven't been used for a while and re-applying them with some new improvements."

To this end, Introversion has implemented a gesture recognition system used to create and control your units. Arundel reckons players are going to have get handy with the mouse, as the better you draw a gesture the stronger the unit you're creating is going to be. They've also tried to reduce the amount of on-screen information and panels to practically nothing. The result promises to be a much more immersive experience free of clutter and distractions. Which, aptly enough, seems to encapsulate the Introversion ethos rather well.

"I guess we proved that one doesn't need huge budgets to make a well received and popular game," Arundel states with pride. "Much like any other industry, you have to cover your arse - selling direct to the consumer from our website was the best decision we ever made. Sub-licensees have come and gone, but we're still here because we could reach the consumer direct."

Darwinia will be reaching you early in the new year.

BEYOND THE DIGITAL CURTAIN

With Anthony Fordham



humour into gaming, especially in the area of third-person turn-based strategy. Tibor uses such expressions as "there is no compulsory management save when you assemble your troops" to convince us that the game isn't just a bad acid flashback made flesh.

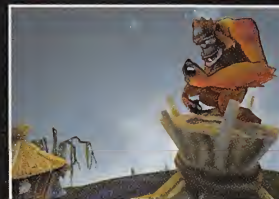
Teams of cute animals flay away at each other in turn-based combat, using a variety of weapons that all have complex and difficult damage modifiers attached to them. Tibor maintains the game can be played by a beginner but will suit everyone.

Tibor promises us four factions of critters, including one hidden faction which, just by looking at them, "will send you falling to the floor, laughing."

I am frightened for the players of Creature Conflict: Clan Wars. I really am.

WHY CREATURE CONFLICT FREAKS ME OUT

- "Cute" characters will give your kids nightmares
- "Humour" thinly veils psychological torture
- Like Worms, except without any of the good bits
- Creepy, dead-eyed rodents ritualistically slaughter each other



CREATURE CONFLICT: CLAN WARS

Tibor Pongracz ate my brain!

The problem with Worms is that sure, it might be fun, intelligent, funny and addictive, but it really lacks that creep-out factor that we've just been crying out for in modern gaming.

Creature Conflict steps bravely to the plate, fresh from the killing fields of the Czech Republic, with a selection of critters drawn in just that wrong kind of way that makes any kids who happen to be passing have nightmares for weeks. Snaggle-toothed rats fire uzis at dead-eyed hamsters while cadaverous orangutans crouch atop grotesque totem poles waiting to rain death on anything furry that passes below. Lead developer Tibor Pongracz maintains that Creature Conflict will inject some much-needed

Developer: **Mithis** Origin: **Czech Republic** URL: **www.cenega.com**

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Alida: An Independent Success Story

THINK THE AGE OF GAMES DEVELOPED BY ONE GUY IN HIS BACK ROOM IS PASSED?
ANTHONY FORDHAM FINDS CAUSE TO THINK AGAIN

Somewhere between Sydney and Canberra there's a town called Bowral. And somewhere in Bowral there's a man named Cos Russo who has single-handedly developed a Myst-style puzzle adventure game called Alida.

The player wanders around a surrealistic island built by an eccentric rock group who have all since mysteriously disappeared. The twist? All the buildings on the island form the shape of a giant guitar. Puzzles abound, while photo-realistic textures give the game an authentic, detailed look similar to Cyan's own Riven.

"It took five years to develop Alida," says Russo. "I really did not want to cut any corners with the quality of the game and I knew that Alida would have to compete with some amazing games."

Indeed, the niche puzzle-adventure genre is home to some real blockbusters. Until the Sims landed and changed everything, Myst was one of the biggest selling games of all time, thanks to its relaxed pace and Grandma-friendly lack of blood and gore.

"I think there is wide appeal for adventure games that immerse the gamer in environments that are magical - and they don't have to kill anything or be killed. The funny thing about gaming is that the media seem to get swept up in the latest technological games - and as far as the general public is concerned, that's all there is out there. But I believe games are like books, movies, music - there are many styles that different people should have access to and enjoy," says Russo.

There's a standard wisdom now among game publishers and distributors that the age of the independent, one-man-team developer is passed. Sure, back in the days of the C64 people like Jeff Minter could churn out two or three games a year, but things, say publishers, have changed.

Russo puts paid to this wisdom, developing Alida all by himself.

"I built Alida entirely on Macs using Strata Studio Pro, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Final Cut Pro,



Cleaner, Supercard, and Revolution. All the surface maps used in Alida were created from digital photos taken around Bowral, New South Wales," he says.

Russo says he is unabashed by the game's resemblance to Cyan's masterpieces.

"I was certainly inspired by Riven. It was a game I couldn't escape from - I was mesmerised by it. For the time I was playing it I really did feel I was somewhere else, experiencing an alternate reality.

"I've been part of the film and music industry all my life and the adventure game genre appealed to me as it's almost like being IN a movie. Every facet of game development is a creative process where I felt I could focus all my abilities in music, graphic design, programming etc. My imagination is pretty wild too!" he says.

Alida was initially distributed online from www.alidagame.com, but Russo says he is more excited about upcoming distribution via Project Three Interactive, which will hopefully see the game on store shelves as you read this.

Despite slow online sales, Russo remains positive.

"I knew that if Alida was going to have any chance at all, its gameplay, graphics, sound and music would have to be as good as Riven. I can only judge from Alida gamer testimonials, I think Alida has a level of quality that all adventure gamers will enjoy."



WIN!



MAGIC THE GATHERING UNHINGED!

It seems Wizards of the Coast has a sense of humour after all. Although we defy anyone to not find Magic The Gathering somewhat amusing, it's nice to see the latest addition to the card game's dizzying range comes with tongue planted firmly in cheek. Unhinged is the follow-up to last year's Unglued series and, as the name suggests, it promises to take the wackiness even further. One summoning card says "If the defending player is wearing any clothing made from denim, this creature is unblockable". There are also

chickens. And a Chicken Revolution.

Thanks to Wizards of the Coast, we have TEN packs to give away, each containing SIX Unhinged booster packs. To be in the running to win, simply answer the following question on the back of an envelope:

Q. How many cards in the Unhinged set?

10
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Send entries to:
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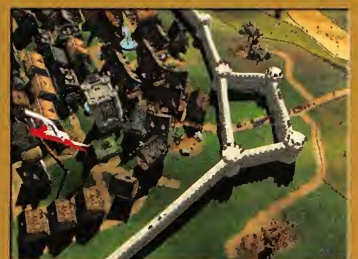
MEDIEVAL LORDS

→ Build, Defend, Expand →



Medieval Lords: Build, Defend, Expand. Challenge aspiring city governors to build and manage thriving cities, protect against invasions from neighbouring kingdoms, and expand into new territories! All in the city building genre's first 3D environment that lets the player zoom right into the action and build anywhere on the map.

Medieval Lords brings city builders inside the walls of richly-detailed cities during the middle ages. Through the course of ten scenarios, players must manage finances, population, and food resources to grow towns into thriving kingdoms. Build docks for fishing local waters, harvest fields to grow food and raise livestock, keep citizens healthy and entertained, and recruit soldiers and cavalry for a well-protected city.





HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham

20Q

Price: \$24.99 **Distributor:** Dorcy Irwin Pacific
Contact: Dorcy Irwin Pacific

Rarely does tech freak me out. Normally, I get a product and I go yeah, I see how that works. I grok it. Wireless networking is ALMOST like magic, sure, but I understand the underlying engineering. It's all cool.

Not so with this thing. It's a toy, a hunk of plastic with a cheap LED display and an annoying bloopy speaker. And yet, thanks to advances in cheap-arse tech that would have made our Monash IT graduate uncles weep to have access to in the 1980s, it stores a chunky database of ordinary, everyday objects, and a set of questions to help it access the database correctly and "guess" what you're thinking.

Okay, so you can't get all clever and think of "Banksia", but I was unnerved that it was able to guess "sunflower". It managed to pick the distinction between "mouse" and "rat", and guess "giraffe" with no problem. But it all depends on the set of questions it asks you. If it doesn't manage to randomly choose a good set, things like "chair" can be too easily confused with "cupboard". Crazy toy. Hours of fun.



SAMSUNG DUOCAM

Price: \$1799 **Distributor:** Samsung **Contact:** www.samsung.com.au

Oh so ugly. Samsung is clearly making a gamble with this slightly bizarre piece of tech: people want lots and lots and lots of functionality more than they want the clean, lean lines of the Apple iPod. That's why the Duocam has two lenses. The top lens takes video footage, while the bottom handles stills. This neatly solves the problem suffered by many modern video cameras: they're

only good for taking videos! The still camera has a chunky 5.25 megapixels, while the video takes standard DV using an 0.8 megapixel sensor - plentiful for MiniDV tape. The unit also handles memory cards and MPEG4 encoding so it's certainly no slouch. Think of the Duocam as a sort of pocket-knife for digital imaging buffs who don't want to haul around five kilos of gear.

PHILIPS 50PF9966 50" PLASMA TV

Price: \$12,699 **Distributor:** Philips **Contact:** www.philips.com.au

Welcome! To the World of Tomorrow! Yes, it's yet another 50 inch plasma TV that costs as much as a very good second hand car, but it now comes with AmbiLight Technology! AmbiLight is truly one of the craziest things ever: because flat TVs now sit too close to the wall to let you put a lamp behind to cut glare, AmbiLight now builds lamps into the back of the TV. Of course, that wouldn't be enough, so Philips has made it so the TV calculates which is the dominate colour in any given scene, then adjusts the colour of the

AmbiLight lamps accordingly. Go "ooh" and "aah" as beautiful mauves and chartreuses wash across your living room, and marvel at how your brain is so primitive it can actually be fooled into thinking the picture is of a higher quality, just because of coloured lights in the background. The new range of TVs also include something called PixelPlus 2, but AmbiLight is cooler, so you can look up the other on the website yourself.



WRISTWATCH TELEVISION

Price: \$250 **Distributor:** Think Geek **Contact:** www.thinkgeek.com

Yes well, one of these was bound to come along sooner or later now, wasn't it? Although, I must say I was expecting something a little less... chunky. I mean, this is 2004 people! This lump of plastic and LCD goodness squats on your wrist and shows you your favourite NTSC-broadcast TV (though surely a dedicated geek can hack it for Australian use) on a teensy colour LCD screen. The whole unit clips off the wrist strap and attaches to a base station which charges it, and gives it speakers. The set of accessories is quite generous, including earphones, dock, chargers and adaptors for various voltages. And the picture quality? Well, the manufacturer claims "high resolution" TV, but the LCD is 280x220 pixels so, frankly, what are they talking about? The earphones act as the antennae, and it can pick up most channels in the VHF and UHF bands. There's also a built-in watch. Hehe.



G5 IMAC

Price: Up to \$3,199 **Distributor:** Apple **Contact:** www.apple.com.au



Okay PC manufacturers, Apple has got away with this crap for too long. Every year they bring out an even more stylish and cool machine and the PC design community sits on its great, Linux-bloated arse and does NOTHING. For God's sake, this thing is running an awkwardly cooled 1.8GHz G5 processor while we have 2.5GHz+ machines that chew DVD and most games in slim albeit ugly notebooks. Graphics are squeezed out by a GeForceFX 5200, but for the first time in a consumer-end Mac since the original iMac, the user can pull the back off and upgrade all the parts except for the speakers. The whole machine is built into the back of a 20-inch widescreen LCD display, including a single slot-loading DVD burner. It's elegant, it's simple, it goes anywhere, but IT'S A MAC. When oh when will someone design a PC even half as cool as this?

PENTAX OPTIOX

Price: \$699 **Distributor:** CR Kennedy **Contact:** www.crkenedy.com.au

Used to be Sony had exclusive rights to weirdly-shaped cameras, viz. its top end range of Cybershots. L-shaped and weird, they freaked out a generation of users. Now it's Pentax's turn to have a go at redefining how a camera should work. By splitting the unit in two, you can swivel the lens and the LCD in opposite directions, and get all those awkward upskirt shots at your local... what? Did I write that or just think it? Anyway, sure, this kind of thing has been available on higher-end digital cameras and videos for about a decade, but the OptioX is surely the swankiest iteration of this idea yet seen. Brushed aluminium, sleek black highlights, it manages to look ultra-modern but also carry the weight of Pentax's proud tradition. Five megapixels, two inch LCD, the ability to record movies plus it's the "thinnest in its class" at only 18mm, to mix scales.



If you're serious about gaming you should be wearing one of these!



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To Boldly MMO

Then you have the problem

[illegible]

If you're not going for the Trekkies then who's going to play this game when: 1) Star Trek was never hip, edgy or cool, 2) there are no new movies in the works and the current series is so bad that Jolene Blalock in her underwear barely helps, and 3) all new content has to be seen, reviewed and approved by a

Timothy C. Best is a senior writer at PC PowerPlay. He's played more games than Baby John Burgess but doesn't look quite as good with a moustache.

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designed by room22



TECH TALK Jason Brown

Lap stop Gaming

Just as hardware indicator lights either provide good news or bad, laptops likewise have the propensity to polarise thoughts towards good or evil, thanks to their many graces and shortcomings. And this month I had something of an epiphany concerning laptop gaming, almost akin to the mathematical supply and demand theories that appeared to Russell Crowe's character in 'A Beautiful Mind'. I started to see follow-on effects that could occur thanks to the rise in popularity of laptop gaming. Some effects are obvious, others a shade more speculative.

Let's start with the obvious though, and look at why laptop gaming itself is now worthy of consideration. One of my biggest regrets is that my last laptop purchase resulted in a fairly well specced unit, but with zero 3D acceleration capabilities. I never expected to play 3D games with it, and was content to limit myself to RTS, retro, strategy games, and "Wheel of Time" via software emulation (shudder) for my train-travelling gaming fix. I was doubly disappointed though, when I moved into garage-game development, and the lack of 3D severely limited my own choice of development platform.

These days the two key issues surrounding laptop gaming performance - 3D acceleration and intelligent CPU throttling - have allowed some such laptop gaming limitations to be overcome. For example, Intel's 'Enhanced' Speed Step throttling technology used in their higher end mobile CPUs ensures that battery life can exceed 3 hours, though at some cost to performance. It's quite an amazing technology and throttles the CPU in more ways than just by dropping the FSB and voltages. Thankfully though, Speed Step can be overridden and, additionally, CPUs can run full tilt when you've got mains power. AMD's PowerNow technology



Laptopting is no longer the domain of the tech guru, hacker or reclusive oddbod

works to achieve similar results.

In terms of 3D acceleration, laptops still trail behind the curve, though admittedly less and less as time has gone by. It's a simple fact that 3D implementation is the largest determining factor in the price of a mobile computer. With the virtually useless generic h'ACME chipset powered bottom feeders costing under the two grand mark, and something featuring the awesome ATI Mobile Radeon 9800 putting you back four or more large ones! That's an awful cost increase for the pleasure of 3D, though the 9800 is an exception in that you're getting near desktop performance from this portable chip. Most laptops however appear with GPUs that perform considerably worse than their namesake desktop sibling, making them satisfactory for most of yesteryear's games, but they're hardly what you'd call future or even current-proof for that matter. Still, they are in a ballpark, and

will provide a certain amount of mobile 3D gaming pleasure, more than that old 2D accelerated craptop anyway. I should mention that if the proposed mobile PCI Express video slot possibility materialises, this might change but it's not yet a reality.

What could turn out to be a real boon is an underlying and absolutely wicked flow-on effect from the laptop gaming movement. Consider this, if a 3GHz laptop equipped with the average 3D processor performs at anywhere between 60-85% of the level at which a similarly specced desktop rig does, what could that mean for minimum system requirements? Probably not much to laptop gamers, but if developers take these discrepancies (and laptop users) into account, a desktop PC should ascend the system requirements hierarchy significantly. Anyone who's bemoaned the incredibly rapid rise of system requirements should

benefit as games developers and publishers rush to cater for this emerging laptop gaming market. This will inadvertently limit minimum requirements to a level that is comparatively lower than the equivalent desktop PC, and considering the life cycle of laptops, that trend could hold for a long time.

Furthermore, consider the marketing demographic of the laptop. Who's got cash to burn on such seemingly mediocre investments? Laptopting is no longer merely the domain of the technical guru, hacker, or reclusive oddbod. The number of middle managers and lower-end white-collar workers that are embracing them as desktop replacements in the home is growing. And when someone of perceived substance drops such a huge wad of cash on one, particularly because a salesperson told them the extra dosh was buying them a gaming powerhouse, they're going to be pretty peeved when their kids get 10 FPS in Doom 3. Ever quaked at the sight of a throng of gamers storming a PR office? Probably not, though a horde of executives brandishing receipts, warrantees, and possibly lawsuits, might be more imposing!

This should go at least some way towards keeping the lowest common denominator at a reasonable level, and thereby keeping struggling desktop gamers a little ahead of the curve. At the very least, advertised minimum system requirements might actually become accurate... at least for desktop gamers anyway.

Jason Brown was conceived in a petrie dish in the laboratory of an inner city telephone exchange. When not talking tech in these very pages he can be found translating impenetrable Taiwanese hardware manuals into English while being nourished intravenously by optic fibres carrying electrolyte.

The Prince of darkness has been making plans to return the dark gods to the world of EO. He awakens the might ice dragon, Aryn, and sends out raging hordes to defeat his enemies.

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**PC
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THE GUERRILLA GAMER

I'm Game, In Theory

How about those game theorists huh? Two issues ago, PCPP gave them valuable column inches (which could have been dedicated to my experience of trying to get DosBox working so I could play Strip Poker 93) to expound on their ideas of how important game theory is and why we need it right away.

I sort of pity these guys because they're like that one kid at school who is so weird no one ever does anything to or with him. Nerds (gamers) get beaten up by the jocks (soulless game publishers) who eventually die of either bad drugs or getting stabbed in the heart outside a nightclub (the buying public) but this one kid just wanders around the playground patting dog turds and eating other people's lunch out of the bins. He's the game theorist.

All game theorists seem to agree that everyone who has anything at all to do with gaming hates them and thinks of them as a great big low-joule cola drinking waste of time, and yet they persist. But as far as I can see, all that game theorists seem to do is justify why gaming needs theory and promise how much better gaming will get once that theory has been decided on, debated over and published in that Mecca (or perhaps Holy Grail) of philosophical pursuit, the Peer Reviewed Journal.

See, the Peer Reviewed Journal is important because you don't get published in it unless all your mates agree that your article is worth publishing. Although, in the academic world you should probably replace the word "mates" with the word "bitterest, railway-spike-through-the-eye-stabbing enemies" - which is actually a whole bunch of words and explains why I never get published in Peer Reviewed Journals.

It's all well and good to cry out for a discipline of game theory, and



Sure, we're having an identity crisis what with all this mass-market shit clogging the shelves

for real life smart people to get involved in discussing and disseminating games in a freaking praxis, didactic, epistemology or semiotic study, but I need to warn you about the rest of the crap that comes with this kind of behaviour.

Oh yeah, it all SOUNDS good. Lots of professors and doctors and pro-vice chancellors sitting around sipping Merlot and talking about the importance of games are makes us hacks here in the PCPP offices feel more justified, but do we want to end up lumped in with the film critics? With the food critics? With, dare I say it, the ARCHITECTURE critics?

I mean, you bag the hell out of a new skyscraper in your latest paper and all your goateed buddies sit around going, yeah, great praxis, but what are we the bleeding public supposed to do about this mighty chunk of steel and concrete in the

middle of the street? Reframe the moment my ARSE!

Now let's see, my point, I put it down around here somewhere. Ah yes, there it is. At the moment, gaming is fresh and free. Sure, we're having a bit of an identity crisis what with all this mass-market shit clogging the shelves, and movie tie-ins selling thousands of units despite being completely awful, but we're largely unencumbered by the ornamentation of academia.

Do we really want to find out from the broadsheets that Professor S of T F University has said something really very, very clever and important about the way Splinter Cell 6: Sam Fisher vs. the Feminist Didactic defines our culture and pigeonholes a whole bunch of guys who just wanted to blow shit up stealthily for half an hour after work?

Read that article in PCPP#104 again. Note the way these guys use the word "play". They use it in a really, really scary way. A bad way. Consider the badness of the phrase "play with yourself" versus "play with your tennis racket" and then multiply by about six. I don't want my "play" to be an important part of my cultural identity. I want it to be time off from having to have a cultural identity, that's why it's called PLAY!

As a final sort of point, let me tell you about how the word "theory" in this context is so different from "theory" as most people understand it. Generally, when we hear the word "theory" we think of science, the theory of black holes, the theory of something that's still being experimented on. When the cultural studies people get a hold of the word "theory" it suddenly gets this new meaning something like "here's a really pig-obvious description of the way people are doing work or behaving in a certain field, except explained using big words to make it sound like we're not just looking out of the window and describing what we see in the street." Game theory - as recently defined in PCPP - isn't about new theories of how to make better games. It's about talking importantly about games that already exist, games that ordinary reviewers (except we're now "critics" because it sounds more important) probably gave 70% and went "meh".

Hell I dunno. Maybe some good will come of it. Maybe it'll stop that kid touching the dog turds. Maybe we will get better games as a result of game theory. But I wouldn't hold your breath.

The Guerrilla Gamer maintains that he is not anti-intellectual, and says he's read Joyce's Ulysses at least halfway through. Although he was drunk for most of it.

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THE ULTIMATE BUFFY & ANGEL DVD PACK



Joss Whedon is a genius. He's the man responsible not only for the Buffy the Vampire Slayer movie, but more recently three of the greatest television series of all time - Buffy, Angel and Firefly.

Buffy turned the teen drama on its head. Post-90210, its witty dialogue was a breath of fresh air, while its cast of mostly adolescent characters were full of believable flaws and all the more endearing for it. You could laugh along with them one moment, then be touched by their inner turmoil the next.

Angel stepped it up a notch when Whedon decided to launch the spin-off series after Buffy reached the end of its third season. Transplanted from the suburban ideal of Sunnydale to the more desperate streets of Los Angeles, Angel deliberately presented a darker, more ambiguous world in which its labyrinthine narrative arcs intertwined from one season to the next.

Few other shows can boast an ensemble of regular characters of the same calibre as those found in Buffy and Angel. From Rupert Giles to Principal Snyder, Warren, Andrew and Jonathan, Spike and Drusilla, Fred and "Evil" Fred, Miss Calendar, Leslie, Adam, the Mayor, limp-wristed Wesley and rogue demon-hunter Wesley, Gunn, Xander, Oz, Willow and Tara, the list of memorable characters goes on and on...

Now, thanks to 20th Century Fox, you can relive all those moments with these two immaculate DVD packs. The Buffy Celebration pack contains all seven seasons of Buffy, plus extensive special features including some terrific audio commentary tracks from Joss Whedon himself. The Angel Celebration pack contains seasons one to four, plus a similar serving of special features. Both packs retail for around \$500.

We have four special prize packs containing both Celebration collections to give away. In addition, one lucky winner will also receive an authentic "Mr Pointy" stake as wielded by Sarah Michelle Gellar on the set of Buffy. To enter, simply answer the following questions on the back of an envelope:

Who said the following lines from Buffy and Angel?

"Cuppa tea, cuppa tea, almost got shagged, cuppa tea, demon monks, shoulda gone to Vegas."

"I feel just like Santa Claus except thinner and younger and female and, well, Jewish."

"I go online sometimes, but everyone's spelling is really bad, and it's depressing."

"Um, well, we listened to aggressively cheerful music sung by people chosen for their ability to dance. Then we ate cookie dough, and talked about boys."

"I'm eleven hundred and twenty years old. Just gimme a frickin' beer."

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Every gamer who saw the Lord of the Rings movie trilogy has no doubt imagined the tale of the Fellowship as a series of epic, sweeping battles where you're giving orders and leading the charge. EA's *Battle for Middle Earth* promises to deliver on that fantasy. **Timothy C. Best** takes the long walk to Mordor...

Developer: **EA LA** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Distributor: **Electronic Arts** Due: **November**

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Putting together *Battle for Middle Earth* was never going to be easy. For one, it's an RTS, which means that it's swimming in a sea of competition. Secondly, it's a game based on a movie, which is usually a kiss of death in and of itself. The adaptation factor is squared by the fact that the movie in question is based on some of the best-known fantasy novels ever written (with fans so dedicated that they speak the fictitious languages). Finally, we just saw Vivendi's *Middle Earth RTS*, *War of the Ring*, which has to make the basic concept a smidge less than elven-fresh.

None of this seems to have daunted Mark Skaggs, which is a good thing since he's the Vice President of EA Los Angeles and Executive Producer of *Battle for Middle Earth*.

Instead of just huddling in the foetal position and sending cryptic notes like "I am a fish" to HQ every milestone day, it seems like EA LA decided to rise to the challenge and create a tailor-made RTS that moves to the beat of a distant drum.

From the way units react to monsters walking among them, to the new upgrade system, resource model and interface, the guys at EA LA have pulled out all of the stops to try and capture much of the *Middle-Earth* movie magic. What's really weird is that it seems to be working.

Fear & Loathing in Lothlorien

One of the first things you'll notice about this game is that your units act a little strangely. When some earth-shaking terror appears they don't just stand there with resigned looks on their faces. When they crush their foes they don't just mill around and wait for new orders, there's cheering and back patting. There's taunting, there's terror. It's all about emotion.

Skaggs traces strategy games back to the likes of Chess, where each little pawn was just a rough symbol for a guy. Well, it seems times have changed.

"In the films everybody sees the creatures, they are alive, they are moving. There is a lot of emotion... now they can see that in the game," Skaggs says.

"The units themselves move beyond being icons and into being little, living breathing things. Now, we're not going to be able to get that perfectly, the first time out, but the difference

between last generation and *Battle for Middle Earth* is stunning because it's a big difference."

All of this is more than just film-inspired eye-candy and will actually affect how battles unfold, but that's not to say that players will spend the entire game chasing down deserters who have headed for the hills.

"If you click on that unit huddling in fear and say, 'yes, I know you're scared, now go and attack,' they will attack," Skaggs assures me.



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"It's that fine line between trying to give these little guys emotions and minds of their own but also making players feel like they're never out of control of their army."

The emotion engine also allows for some other neat little moments, like when Ents see a lumber mill and something snaps in their sap-filled heads and they hit "anger mode". It's the only time you'll see their tree-like limbs move at a decent speed (unless there's fire involved) and it's a sight to behold.

My Hobbit Interface

The second thing you'll notice about this game is that the interface is tiny. There's only really a mini-map and some icons to let you keep track of heroes. The bar that gives you base options or shows troop selection is gone. Skaggs says that it is plain outdated, and just took up screen space that could be filled with Orcs.

All of the RTS controls that we know and love have stayed intact. Selecting units, dragging the mouse to grab lots of guys at once, they are all the same. The difference comes when you right-click on something. Instead of you choosing options from a bar along the bottom, you'll choose from a ring of context sensitive options that pop up around the thing you've selected. Then you just choose what you want, be it special attacks or which units you want a building to train. Click on the building again and it shows the menu options as well as what's in production.

The thinking behind this is that if you move the menu options so that they are around what you're clicking on, then you have a much smaller mouse movement to reach them, and there can be little doubt about what you're getting and why.

All of this also makes base building really simple. Each army gets a certain number of different sized plots in and around their bases. Click on one, select an appropriate building and you're away. No more scrolling around to get the sucker out of the red and no more chasing peons to put a hammer in their hands.

The thinking behind all of this is to make everything simpler, for people who have never played an RTS, and quicker, for experts with hulking armies to command.



Pulling the Mr. Studly

Battle for Middle Earth Executive Producer Mark Skaggs shares a tale of multiplayer woe versus his 10-year-old son: "I thought I was Mr. Studly, putting in an Elven Wood and setting up my Rangers... let him walk into my trap and it's kind of sad to say, as I was being all superior and repelled his forces, he was actually just sitting in the back of his base and then next thing I know is there's Trolls and Catapults and a Fell Beast and it was just a bad day for the forces of Gondor." It's a lesson I've (almost) learnt time and time again: fancy tricks are great, but sometimes you just need swordsmen...



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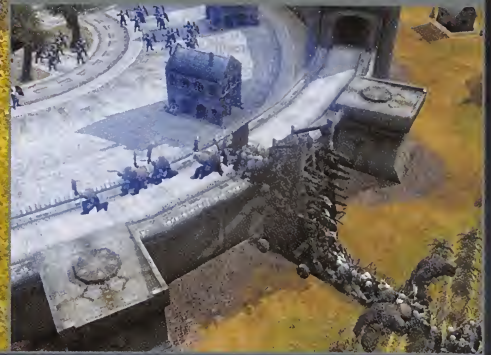
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Magic in the Air

In Middle Earth magic has to be earned. The more you battle the more points you gather to put into some global mischief. These points go into summoning your Army of the Dead and Balrogs, mass heals, turning the Eye of Sauron onto a battle to scare the poop out of the good guys, summoning Elven Woods (think a small-scale forest just appearing) which hide elves and rangers and so much more. Naturally, most spells have counters that turn the tide on the original caster ... like Devastate which demolishes Elven Wood, turning it into a handy lumber resource for you as well as exposing the hidden troops.



Sea of Green

To help recreate some of the scale of the movies, rank and file units come in groups known as hordes. That means that one click moves a bunch of guys together. For Orcs each horde is 12 guys; for Gondor soldiers it's five.

When you send two hordes together, individual unit AIs take over to distribute attacks and make everything look suitably Lord of the Rings-like. It's tooth and nail, cleaver verses longsword. What really makes this system really interesting is the way that different types of hordes can be mashed together into something more dangerous than the parts. If you combine archers with swordsmen, the melee units will automatically form up around the squishy ranged units, forming a block that combines durability with fire power.

If horses are coming you can combine swordsmen with pikemen to break the charge and then mop up the pieces, or combine archers and siege weapons to break any attempts to shut down your barrage. Like other RTS games certain units counter others very well and combining units makes for a much more complex dynamic.

Beyond that, the combinations not only cover your "guard" options but they also allow for some

surprises... like when Trolls start throwing the Orcs they are teamed with.

"Oh yeah, that's good times," says Skaggs, "A rock is a better thing to throw, though, right?"

We'll have to agree to disagree on that one since Orcs are free and rocks are heck of a lot more pleasant.

Money for Nothing and Orcs for Free

Yes, you read that right, Orcs are free. When it comes to hordes, no one does it like Mordor. Upgrading them to more exciting things like crossbowmen, that costs money, but your basic troops come in endless, timed waves, with only an army-wide population cap (of several hundred) stopping you from covering the map in green. Mordor also comes to the party with the likes of Trolls, flying Fell Beasts, Ring Wraiths and catapults. The idea here is to wash the field with free Orc flesh while you bring in the big guns.

Gondor is all about knights in armour. They are the closest to your standard human army with great defences, the best walls, heartiest swordsmen and giant trebuchets. If you let them dig in you're going to have a heck of time getting them out.

The Rohirrim are your super mobile army, specialising in cavalry. Don't get caught by one of their charges or it's curtains. To balance out their somewhat limited focus the Rohirrim also get the majority of the heroes on their side, including Gimli and Legolas, as well as being able to build Ent Moots and get the tree huggers on their side.

Finally, we have Isengard with its siege works, Sauramon and fighting Uruk-hai.

Cash and No Carry

As you can imagine, things are done a little differently in Middle Earth, even when it comes to resources.

The good guys generate their cash by building farms and market places, which provide a constant flow of resources – at the expense of valuable in-base building plots – while bad guys get their cash from slaughter houses and lumber mills.

Skaggs says, "So we're trying to keep it, with the exception of the lumber mills, from the 'we'll run out with a harvester, collect some stuff and run back to base,' because it just doesn't fit the world of Middle Earth."

Obviously, creeps do fit Middle Earth, because players can also make money by tracking down neutral monsters and jacking them for cash as well.

The resource model gets a little more tactical with the addition of "economy plots" which give you a free farm or slaughter house, but at the expense of making you protect them outside of



Friends and Foes

Battle for Middle Earth promises all of your usual multiplayer options for up to eight players with your standard RTS game types, plus your usual ladders, rankings and so on. It also offers scenarios where players have the chance to replay historic battles from the movies, sort of like giving wargamers the chance to storm the beaches of Normandy. These scenarios, aren't just straight vanilla either.

One scenario allows you and a friend to control the battle of Helm's Deep... as the bad guys. Your endless hordes versus computer-controlled goodness - how much fun does that sound?

your base. Interestingly enough, the more farms you build the more of a production bonus you get, and if you decide to go heavy on industry, the more furnaces you put in place the cheaper your units become. "It's kind of an accelerator to push the game into high gear when you have enough critical mass," explains Skaggs.

Of course, getting your economy going is good, but not getting your base trashed when the Orcs come a-calling is even better. This is especially the case in Middle Earth.

Building (a) Better Tomorrow

In BfME it's not just your units that gain experience but your buildings as well. This means that the earlier you build a farm the more money it will make in the long run. Levels mean more than just additional gold; eventually even farms get to defend themselves with the Better Homes and Gardens guard tower renovation.

What's really cool about this system is that it applies to everything you build. Farms are continuous use, but things like barracks grow as you produce more guys with them. As they gain levels they become more effective and offer new goodies.

The effects of building experience are huge, for one it encourages players to build all of their troops in one or two places, slowing rushes and base creeping, and, two, it means high-level buildings become critical production centres and even more critical targets.

When it comes to troops, veterancy doesn't just equal some stat boosts, it equals a big jump in status and a new banner. This not only lets you know about their promotion, but also rallies new guys to their cause. While individual units auto heal, the only way to replace fallen guys in a horde is to wait for that banner. Struggling units go from one or two simple soldiers to veterans, who slowly claw their way back to their full complement of guys.

When it comes to Orcs I have a new mantra: "death or veterancy". I figure that cannon fodder should either impale itself on the lances of goodness or survive enough suicide missions to become really kick-arse. It's just my way of thinking.



Timing is Everything

Heroes, summoned fiends, Nazgûl on Fell Beasts and Armies of the Dead all can dramatically swing the tide of battle. Heroes get amazing abilities like Legolas's one-hit-one-kill sniper attack and Gandalf can clear a choke point with a wave of his staff. Don't even get me started about the Army of the Dead... you've seen the movie right? To balance this, EA LA has come up with a system that Mark Skaggs calls: "Oh, yeah? Here's this!" He describes it as something along the lines of: "There's your Army of the Dead, well, here's my Balrog. Yours goes away, mines permanent. What are you going to do about it?" The idea is that no matter how devastating an attack is it never takes away your ability to give a little something back.

Besides experience, players can also upgrade units with new weapons and armour. There's even a little porter who pops out of the armoury with a little cart and takes the gear to them. It's the service like that which makes Middle Earth such a great place to wage wars.

The Singles Game

The single player campaign covers the events from the movie, starting with players just controlling the Fellowship (as in a bunch of heroes) and moving right up to the massive battle at Minas Tirith. What's interesting about this is that players get to choose the order of many of their missions on the game's stunning overland map. In one region you'll see an Orc army on the march, another you'll see a city about to be laid siege. You manoeuvre your forces to meet the threats as you see fit, and you can even arrange it so that reinforcements can arrive during battles (although that will mean less veteran units for following conflicts). The reinforcements come in the form of more troops, as opposed to a whole

new army hitting the field, as that could totally wreck any semblance of game balance. Of course, your forces will be spread out, and they often won't make it in time...

One of the biggest elements of Battle for Middle Earth is also the hardest to capture in words, it's the way the game looks in motion. You have hundreds of guys on screen, Balrogs rising up and sweeping rank and file away like bugs, cowering swordsmen and Fell Beasts swooping out of the sky to pick up heroes and drop them to their deaths. Pikemen turn into a porcupine of spears around archers as cavalry scramble to dodge around them and heroes rock the battle the field with thunderous powers. Skaggs says that he doesn't want them to be so good that losing Legolas makes you want to quit, but he says that seeing him up on a castle wall and taking out 30 tightly grouped Orcs with one Arrow Wind just seems too right to take out.

All of the basic game changes seem set to streamline the game experience, and even the new context sensitive controls just make sense. Why jump down to a control bar every few seconds when you can just have the same options pop-up around the thing you're clicking on?

At the moment this game is looking awesome, from the art design to the way the units move across the field. My only concerns are whether Lord of Rings really offers up enough unit diversity to keep things fresh and whether EA LA can get all the new features to band together and play nice in time for release. Keep your fingers crossed, because the Battle for Middle Earth is coming, and the forces of good Lord of the Rings gaming could use some help.



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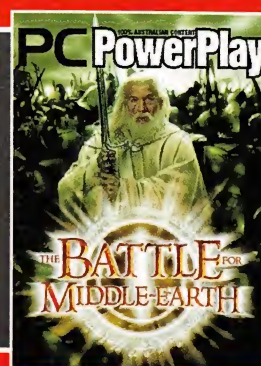


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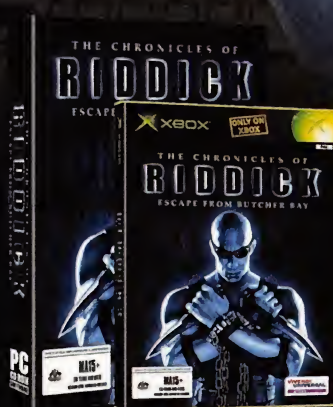
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Despite claims to the contrary, the RPG isn't dead. It's merely returned to the inn for some rest and recuperation. In a year dominated by first-person shooters, we felt it was time to take a glimpse at some of next year's biggest games. 2005 is shaping up to be the year of the RPG.

Over the next few pages, *ELIOT FISH* tracks down the Sith Lords in *KOTOR 2*, *DAVID WILDGOOSE* checks out the Dungeon Siege sequel, *NATHAN COCKS* researches Bioware's *Dragon Age*, while *TIMOTHY C. BEST* runs down the Ten Commandments of Role-Playing Design...



ROLE PLAYING

GODS

Knights of the Old Republic II The Sith Lords

It's not often you get a second chance to be naughty or nice. Eliot Fish pulls a Jedi mind trick to find the information we're looking for.

Developer: **Obsidian** Publisher: **LucasArts** Distributor: **Electronic Arts** Due: **February**

Off the top of your head, what are some of your favourite CRPGs of recent years? If the Fallout series, Baldur's Gate series, NeverWinter Nights, Icewind Dale and Planescape: Torment made your list, then you're already a fan of new development studio, Obsidian Entertainment, and maybe didn't even realise it. That's because five of the brains behind those aforementioned games are now the founding members of Obsidian, and also the people tasked with bringing us the upcoming Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords and NeverWinter Nights 2. Eighteen of the staff members at Obsidian are also ex-Black Isle talent, so these guys know CRPGs better than almost any other development team on the planet. You could say that The Sith Lords is in very safe hands indeed. In fact, it wouldn't be foolish to expect this sequel to eclipse the original. Grab a hold of your lightsaber (no, I said your lightsaber) and come with us as we explore what we know of this Wookiee-sized adventure.

Beyond Good & Evil

Whilst you're not playing the same character as you did in the first Knights of the Old Republic, The Sith Lords puts you in the worn out Jedi boots of someone who is, as it turns out, vaguely connected with the events of the first game, and thus, the story continues; only this time around, the journey is all the more rife with conflict and moral dilemma. Instead of attempting to roll all possible endings from the first game into its sequel ala Deus Ex: Invisible War, The Sith Lords has been designed so that the game will learn which path you chose in

your first Knights of the Old Republic adventure and adapt its story on the fly. In the first stage of the game, The Sith Lords engages your character in some very nifty NPC conversations where you can relate your character's 'memories' of what events took place five years earlier (in the previous game). You'll casually argue with an NPC over whether your character from the previous game was male or female and good or evil. This simple conversation then sets in motion how those events will be referred to for the rest of the game, keeping The Sith Lords in continuity with your view of the universe. It also affects the possible appearance of returning characters, depending on what you choose to reveal to the inquisitive NPC.

Of course, it should come as no surprise that The Sith Lords is full of clever writing. The Lead Designer is Chris Avellone, the man who wrote much of Planescape: Torment. As we've played through the game in its early incarnation, it's clear that a lot more thought has gone into every player interaction with the game world. For instance, NPC dialogues are more impressively scripted and the dialogue trees more in-depth - now even accounting for player skills. For instance, in the first mission of the game, after you meet one of the new characters, Atton Rand, our Repair skill was noted in a conversation and our character was allowed to offer more technical advice on the problem at hand.

Likewise, computer interfaces are now more complex, and allow for more snooping around if you have the appropriate computer skill. In fact, there's a whole sub-quest in the first part of the game regarding



THE BANTHA BUNCH

Players desperate to know what happened to Bastila, Canderous, Carth and HK-47 from Knights of the Old Republic, will be pleased to discover that most of those characters will feature in The Sith Lords in some shape or form. A few of them will even return to your party, depending on the story choices you've made. Whilst Obsidian have admitted that they will re-use the majority of alien races and repetitive facial types again, The Sith Lords does feature new Trandoshans, Mandalorians, Ithorians and at least one new Wookiee and Zabrak (Darth Maul's species). There are also new droid designs, including an early incarnation of the familiar spherical black torture droid that menaced Princess Leia on the Death Star. Be handy having one of those in your party wouldn't it...?



the discovery of who is behind a mysterious attempt on your life that can't be completed unless your character is computer literate. Straight from the get-go, it's obvious just how much more thought has gone into the story, the set-up and the interactivity in *The Sith Lords*.

This first section of the game involves your character, a Jedi, waking up from a long sleep in a Kolto tank. Your memory is a little foggy on recent events, and you quickly discover where exactly you are (a mining facility called Peragus) and immediately your investigation gets under way. Rather than being herded through a story set-up, the player is allowed the freedom to snoop around and absorb bits of information from computers and one or two other characters, to get an idea of what their role exactly is. There's more of a mystery here than the first *Knights of the Old Republic*, and it's crucial to sucking you right into the game from the first few minutes of play.

As LucasArts' *KOTOR II* producer, Mike Gallo, explains, "the story has to be compelling, and the player really has to care about the characters, so establishing and building those elements up early on are very important. Once that's been accomplished it's all about maintaining it, and paying off at the climax of the story."

Admittedly, on first inspection, *The Sith Lords* doesn't look any visually different to the first *Knights* game, aside from a few new animations in combat and a frame-rate improvement, it feels very

much the same to play. Menus have been given a significant tweak, however, including scaling for different monitor resolutions and a number of other PC-friendly enhancements. In fact, LucasArts plan on releasing the Xbox and PC versions simultaneously this time, so the game should be near identical, content-wise, on both platforms. With no technical headaches to disrupt the development process this time, more depth to the story and player interaction is definitely where *The Sith Lords* is set to excel.

Gallo is a bit more dramatic about it: "The choices that the player makes throughout the story will have an affect on the overall galaxy". No pressure or anything.

Even though you begin the game as a Jedi, your powers are weak and simply not a choice for you in combat until further into the game. Seeing as all players start the game as a Jedi, the team at Obsidian has ensured that there is still gameplay flexibility within that character type by introducing all new sub-classes.

"You can start the game out as one of three different Jedi classes - Sentinel, Guardian, or Counselor, which then branch out to a variety of specialised classes," says Gallo. "There are over 60 new feats and Force powers that you can choose from as you progress, including Force Sight, Force Confusion, Force Scream and Force Fury."

"Force Sight allows the player to see through doors and will reveal the alignments of characters (NPCs and PCs will 'glow' an appropriate color - red, blue or grey) that are near him or her. With Force Confusion, players can turn weak-minded enemies against one another in combat. Force Scream will do





sonic damage to opponents in a radius around the character that uses it. Force Fury will give your character a boost during combat that will grow if they defeat opponents while it's active. We've also gone through all of the Force powers that were in KOTOR and have given them a facelift. We've also increased the level cap."

Lightsaber combat has also been enhanced with a variety of different forms of lightsaber technique, so

you are suitably evil enough, and we're led to believe that the game isn't called The Sith Lords - that's plural, kids - for nothing.

We've seen character designs for a variety of Sith Lords, some of which just might end up exploring the galaxy alongside you. All the different styles of bad guys (and girls) are represented too - we all know of the ugly duckling, Darth Sion, but there's another handful of bad guys and girls waiting in the

Have a Blastech rifle set for getting shots off at an emey at distance... and then switch duel lightsabers for some close-quarters sushi

that not all Jedi fight the same way. Are you ruthless and aggressive or elegant and precise? This also involves a number of new stances, including a defensive stance for Jedi who like to keep their distance. There's simply more meat to the sandwich here for fans eager to role-play their ideal Jedi... or Sith.

Scared of the Dark?

Your journey down the path of light or dark has also been given many more layers of choice and story depth, as The Sith Lords has been designed to react more meaningfully when NPCs become aware of your alignment. No longer will characters just converse with you normally if your Dark Side rating has made your appearance obviously twisted and evil. Players who are plummeting rapidly towards the dark side will also attract exclusive party companions who will only join you if

wings, including a regal-looking but corrupt female Sith, twisted half-cyborgs, bounty hunters, ugly aliens and more evil droids.

Aside from 10 potential party members at any one time (only three of which can be active), NPCs will also be more sensitive to your personality, and players who are clearly evil will affect those around them. Companions will react far more severely than just chastising you on your evil actions this time, and your alignment could have greater consequences for your companions' sub-plots, especially seeing as the ability to take on an apprentice appears to be a more and more likely part of the story.

Of course, lovers of the many mini-games such as Pazaak, haven't been left out in the Hoth-like cold, as Gallo explains, "We've made the mini-games feel more exciting with varied terrain and animated



CUE FANFARE

Instead of regurgitating the John Williams music ad nauseum as is the case with most Star Wars games these days, the fact that The Sith Lords is set thousands of years before the movies was good enough reason to get a whole new soundtrack written. This side of things has been handled by LucasArts. "The music for the game is being written by LucasArts' own Mark Griskey (note: the chap who did the music for Gladius). He's written over an hour of new, fully-orchestrated music. Mark is very familiar with the Williams scores, and of course KOTOR. This time around we'll be doing it with a full orchestra, which we're all really excited about!" yelps producer, Mike Gallo.

environments (for Swoop racing and turret-based shoot 'em ups). Pazaak is back as well, and there are some tweaks and improvements there as well (such as a new Doubles card that doubles the value of the last card you received)."

Naturally, what would a Star Wars game be without action? The combat in *The Sith Lords* takes what worked from *KOTOR* and enhances it in many ways. One of the handiest new features is the way you can preset your character with two sets of equipped weapons which can be toggled on the fly during combat. For example, you could have a Blastech rifle set for getting shots off at an enemy in the distance, and then with the press of a button, switch over to duel lightsabers for some close-quarters sushi without having to navigate a single sub-menu. Combat animations will also be dependent on the strength of your character, with some animations for certain powers changing to reflect your higher level abilities.

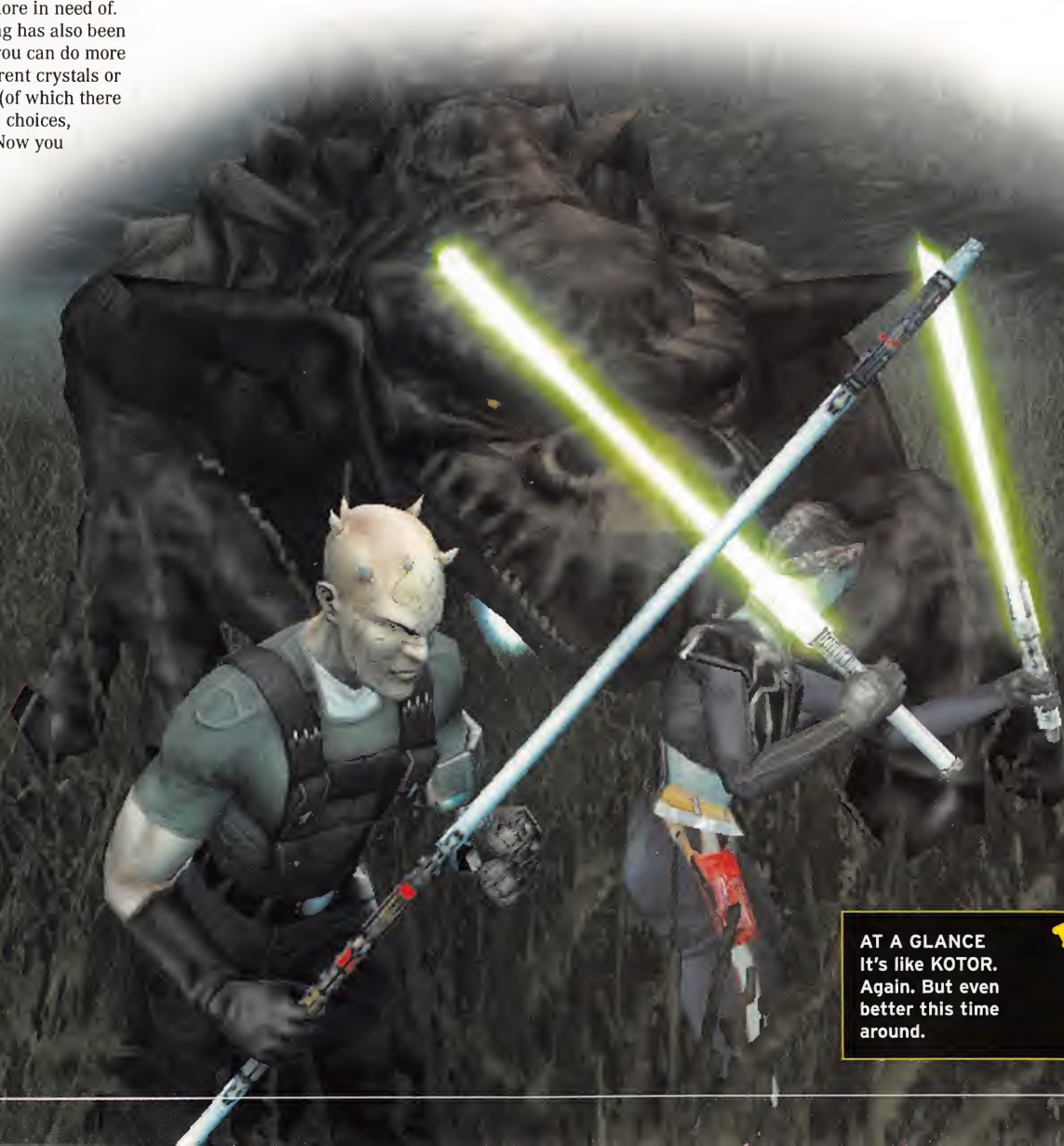
Items can now also be custom made at workbenches, from medikits to useful tools. If you have the right skill, you can also break down items you don't want and re-use the chemicals or parts to create the items you're more in need of. Lightsaber modding has also been enhanced so that you can do more than just add different crystals or change the colour (of which there are now at least 10 choices, including white). Now you

have six upgrade slots and can change the lens, emitter and energy cell, although you can't change the look of the actual hilt.

Gallo recognises that certain areas of *KOTOR* were disappointing in terms of how barren and lifeless they were to explore.

"We're adding more motion and life into the levels," he says. "We want the worlds to feel more alive and lived-in so we've added things like rain, snow and lightning. These type of effects help to set the overall mood, and combined with the ambient sound and characters, will draw the player into the environment."

There are also a huge number of locations to explore – we counted about seven planets and multiple locations within those destinations. The player will return to a few planets from the first game – although, sadly, not Tatooine – and new planets include the smuggler's capital, Nar Shaddaa; Dxun, a moon to the planet Onderon, with its steamy jungles and Mandalorian connections; your character's first port of call after escaping Peragus, the technologically advanced, Telos; and what would a game about *Sith Lords* be without a planet of pure eeeevil...?



AT A GLANCE
It's like *KOTOR*.
Again. But even
better this time
around.



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Dungeon Siege II

Gas Powered Games promises more than just hot air

Developer: Gas Powered Games Publisher: Microsoft Distributor: Microsoft Due: Q1 2005

"We learned that players of the first *Dungeon Siege* had a great time, but ultimately they yearned for more depth in story, combat and character progression," admits Kevin Lambert, Lead Designer at Gas Powered Games.

Such honesty is refreshing. *Dungeon Siege* was almost a good game. The basics were in place; the world was beautiful, the interface was spot on, and the core play thrust you straight into the action. Beyond that, however, the lack of substance was evident to all.

So the first thing Lambert and company set out to do with the sequel was to add more of everything. Fans wanted more character skills to further the role-playing aspect, so that's what Gas Powered Games is delivering.

"Each character has multiple roles that players can choose to specialize in by spending skill points in the different skill trees," says Lambert.

One failing of the original game was that the characters became too similar, until ultimately there was little to distinguish your fighter

from another player's fighter. To address this lack of variety, fighters in *Dungeon Siege 2* may choose to specialise in a balanced sword-and-shield style, a brutish two-handed weapon style or a quick and dangerous dual-wield style.

Beyond raw stats, the developer is also keen to flesh out the personality of each character, giving them ambitions and motivations above merely clearing out the next set of wandering monsters and looting the next chest of treasure.

"Rather than have a crew of nameless, faceless hired guns that players might not care much what happens to them, each party member has a specific history and relationship with other party members," Lambert confirms.

He is also quick to reassure us that narrative depth was one of the major areas of focus for the sequel. Although lips are tight at the Gas Powered office regarding any details, Lambert is confident that *Dungeon Siege 2* "stays more true to the meaning of RPG". The more optimistic among you can



FEATURE CREATURE

Tagging along for the ride throughout the first game was your trusty pack mule. He was a loyal bestial companion, never shirking his duty as ubiquitous equipment carrier and shin kicker. And now he's back, only this time he's not the only pet signing up at the adventurer recruitment office. The Fire Imp, for instance, performs markedly better in combat than his four-legged colleague. You can also affect the abilities of your pets by what you feed them - and, trust me, they'll eat anything, from food to unwanted short swords.

AT A GLANCE
It's like *Diablo* has grown a pair of ogre-sized balls.





interpret that to mean your choices actually matter – the world responds to the way you’ve chosen to play your role.

Although the full impact of this is something only a thorough play test will reveal, we do know that you will find yourself revisiting locations as the story progresses. This type of quest structure is in stark contrast to the original, in which you never had to look back... only forward down the next corridor chock full of enemies.

Of course *Dungeon Siege* was never meant to be *Planescape: Torment* and as such the real crux

of the experience is combat. Never mind the pseudo-literary bollocks, here’s the lightning bolts and claymores.

“I think the most crucial thing to get right in any game is to make sure it’s fun,” says Lambert. “For *Dungeon Siege 2*, it’s all about fast-paced, over-the-top combat and that’s where we’ve spent a huge amount of our effort.”

The overall design goal for the combat system was to provide the player with enough options to keep them engaged on a moment-to-moment basis during battle. In addition to the options offered by

the abovementioned skills, new features such as Powers and Chants aim to extend the tactical gambits available both during and between encounters.

Lambert believes that the Powers, in particular, represent points on the roadmap of character progression. Part of the enjoyment of character building will come with identifying the ultimate Power you wish your character to have, then determining the best route to take to get there.

“Once acquired, Powers have a very important role in combat because they can do anything from

allowing the player to completely dominate an encounter to simply making your screen light up with awesome effects,” Lambert enthuses.

Throw into the mix a host of new weapons, spells and abilities, a diverse range of party companions (in the shape of pets, see boxout) and a far more complex set of AI routines for the hordes of monsters, and you have the potential for epic battle scenes aplenty.

It looks like *Dungeon Siege 2*’s pack mule has got a lot more meat on its bones this time around.

David Wildgoose



Dragon Age

The RPG masters get reacquainted with orcs and goblins

Developer: **Bioware** Publisher: **TBC** Distributor: **TBC** Due: **TBC**

Baldur's Gate, Neverwinter Nights, Knights of the Old Republic; if there is one developer today who can be considered a staple of the PC RPG scene it is Bioware. In the past the Canadian developer has been responsible (in whole or in part) for some of the most widely popular titles the genre has seen. Despite their development of the Xbox-only Jade Empire, Bioware has not forgotten the PC faithful and is currently developing Dragon Age, a PC-only RPG that takes standard fantasy elements and adds Bioware's personal spin on the setting.

Dragon Age is a totally new property for Bioware, a company who has, until recently, lived off developing games based on existing licenses. "Dragon Age is a huge step forward for us in terms of world design and story telling," began Lead Designer James Ohlen when we quizzed him about this new world they are creating. "We have fully realised languages, alphabets, races, histories,

religions and societies. Some fantasy staples still exist in Dragon Age, such as elves, dwarves, knights, wizards and, of course, dragons. However, we've tried to put a different spin on all of them. We want players to think of Dragon Age as the most realistic and immersive fantasy world they have ever experienced."

One aspect to the game design that appears to be large on the agenda for Dragon Age's development is the scope of its telling. James Ohlen and Project Director / Producer, Scott Greg speak enthusiastically about wanting to make Dragon Age a big game in the areas of story telling, immersion and cinematic experience. "Dragon Age will be a turning point in the genre, where role-playing games begin to compete against the best that Hollywood has to offer," enthused Ohlen.

You only need to take a look at screenshots of the opening sequence to understand that



FROM WHERE DO YOU HAIL FRIEND?

One interesting aspect to character creation in Dragon Age is the way players will actually chose their starting point. This initiates an origin story unique to that choice, players will progress through an hour long mini-game that serves to highlight their own background and heighten the player's connection with the gameworld.



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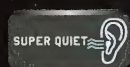
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Bioware is serious about this goal. A massive confrontation of two opposing armies carried out in a scale reminiscent of Lord of the Rings battles moves across the screen as the camera swiftly zooms in on two key fighters. If this level of visual explosiveness continues through out the game then Dragon Age could very well be the Hollywood contender Bioware wants it to be.

Assisting the cinematic experience is obviously the game's new graphics engine. Built specifically for Dragon Age based on lessons learned during the development of previous game

engines, the new system is packed full of all the DirectX 9 tomfoolery we have grown to love. Despite the high end technology required to run Dragon Age at its best, Scott Greg is quick to point out that the owners of lower end PCs are not going to be left out in the cold: "Since we are planning to support a broad range of systems, all of the art being creating for Dragon Age has an incredibly high level of detail. This will allow people with low-end systems to enjoy playing the game, while those with high-end systems will just get a visual quality that is truly cutting-edge."

Actual gameplay should be

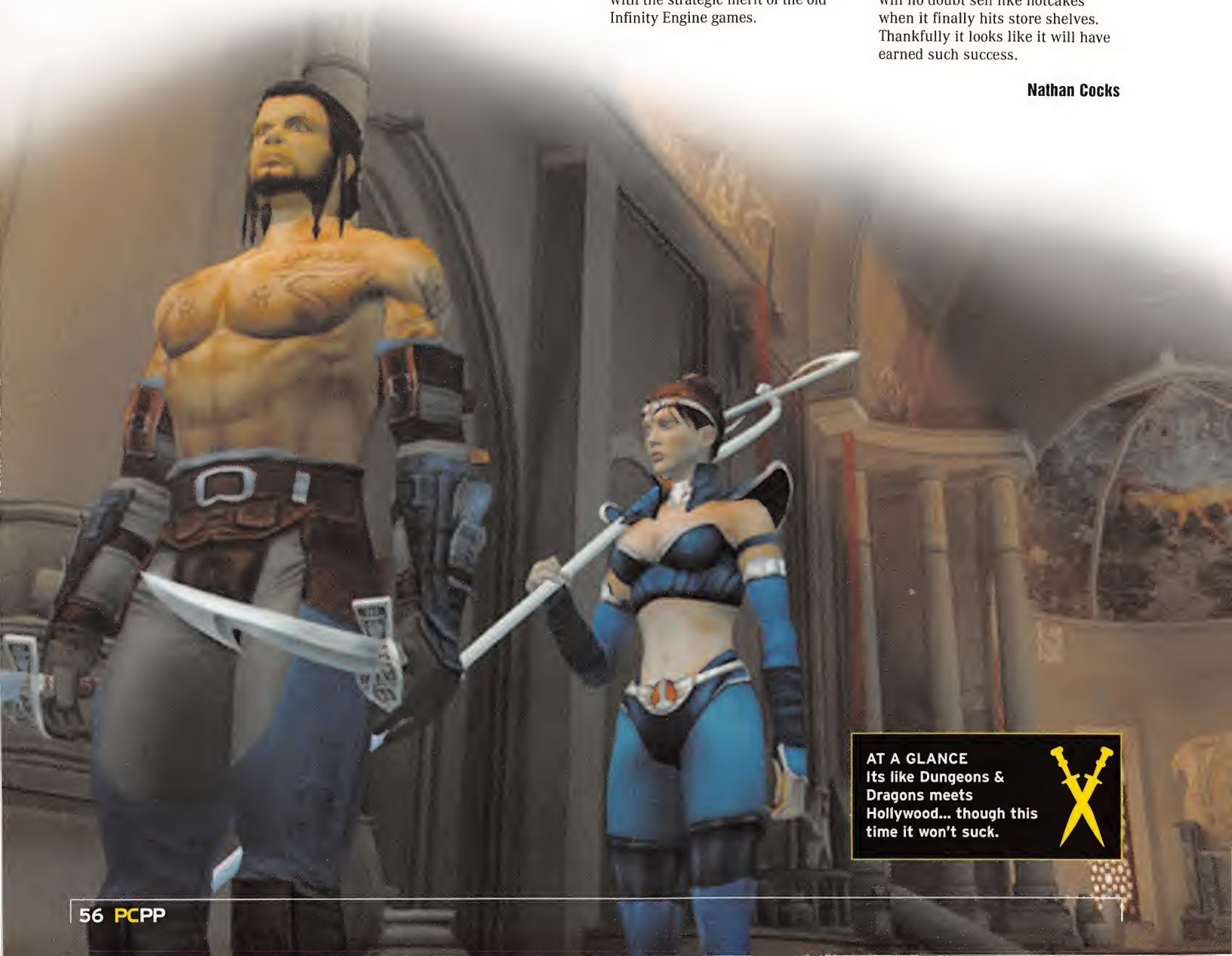
familiar to anyone who has played Bioware's previous efforts. The combat system in particular makes use of the tried and true 'pause and play' system popularised by Baldur's Gate. James Ohlen comments on the exact system: "The combat system of Dragon Age is most similar to that of Baldur's Gate. However, combat is faster paced and more cinematic, which will appeal to action-RPG fans."

Ohlen also promises a wide variety of finishing moves along with beautifully animated special attacks and spell effects. With its similarity to the Baldur's Gate system we should be left with a combat engine that allows for the movie like battles seen in Knights of the Old Republic with the strategic merit of the old Infinity Engine games.

Of course an RPG is not an RPG without character development. Dragon Age looks like it may take this further than previous Bioware titles, allowing for customisation and development that has a real effect on the world around you, even to the point of the story being told being affected as Ohlen demonstrates: "For example, if the player becomes a blood mage, he might find himself being hunted by Templars in the service of the Chantry."

After the incredible success of Knights of the Old Republic it is good to see Bioware isn't resting on its laurels. Dragon Age could very well end up becoming the quintessential Bioware RPG and will no doubt sell like hotcakes when it finally hits store shelves. Thankfully it looks like it will have earned such success.

Nathan Cocks

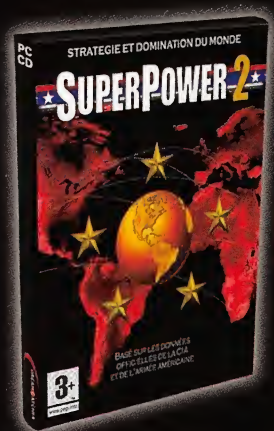


AT A GLANCE
It's like Dungeons & Dragons meets Hollywood... though this time it won't suck.



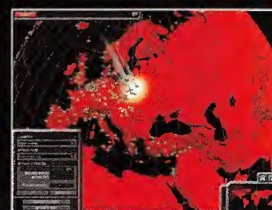
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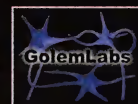
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Dungeon Lords

A more intimate kind of hack 'n' slash

Developer: **Heuristic Park** Publisher: **QV Software** Distributor: **QV Software** Due: **December**



AT A GLANCE
It's like Diablo with
brains and without
the RSI.



D.W. Bradley's Wizardry games are generally considered one of the better RPG series created, but for many they were simply too complex to be accessible. Bradley's next foray into the world of RPG gaming appears to be doing away with the complexity of his previous titles and turning to a combat system that is more Diablo than D20 whilst retaining the compelling story, world and character interaction that drives traditional RPGs like Baldur's Gate.

While Dungeon Lords will have the trappings of classic RPGs it is still an action game at heart and most of your game time will be spent

slicing and dicing those foes out to do the same to you. Thankfully the game will not be a click-fest like certain other titles we could mention but will involve a more intimate control setup where you control your sword thrusts directly while simultaneously blocking with your shield and casting spells.

We're still a way out from release but if Bradley makes good on his intentions Dungeon Lords could very well be the next big action RPG; perfect for all those Diablo gamers out there looking for something with a bit more bite.

Nathan Cocks

The Witcher

Polish developer takes role-playing where Tolkien wouldn't dare

Developer: **CD Projekt** Publisher: **TBC** Distributor: **THC** Due: **TBC**



Andrzej Sapkowski may not be a name known to many outside his native Poland but this author's tales of a world where men become mutant vagabonds, living on the outside of a society they are sworn to protect, are some of the most widely read fantasy novels of that nation. The Witcher is an RPG set in Sapkowski's world and rather than forcing you to follow the path of the novel's protagonist you are given free rein to create your own tale.

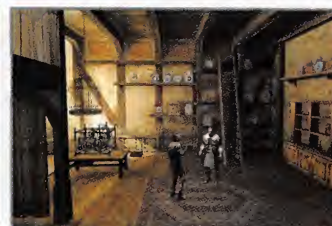
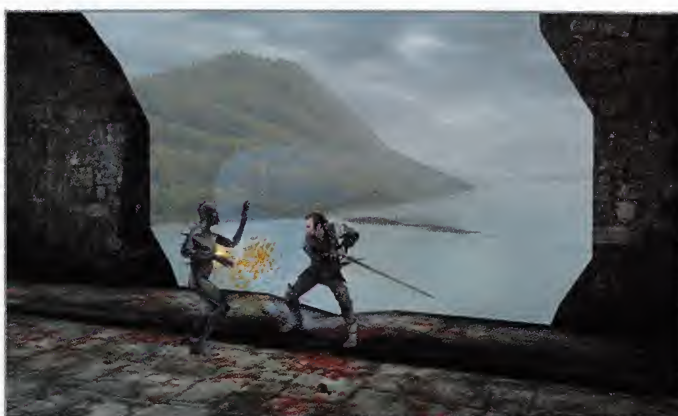
Visually The Witcher looks a treat. It uses a heavily modified version of Bioware's Aurora engine that allows for a more cinematic

perspective rather than the more conventional view in Neverwinter Nights. The game also features motion captured animation to bring to life the sword based combat so prevalent in the Sapkowski novels.

Fantasy RPGs have for too long relied on inspiration from traditional sources. While the world of The Witcher is not without its Tolkien influences, there is more than enough of a Slavic flavour to lend a unique feel to this game. With its unique history laden setting, player determined character development, multiple endings and a dark mature story, The Witcher could very well take us all by surprise.

Nathan Cocks

AT A GLANCE
It's like Lord of the
Rings without those
mincing elves and
bigger swords.



The Bard's Tale

Back for the stadium reunion tour

Developer: InXile Publisher: THQ Distributor: THQ Due: Q1 2005

If you've been around the block once or twice and you don't might a little RPG action, then mentioning Bard's Tale should spark some fond memories. Well, get with the now, old-timer, because the Bard is coming to a millennium near you.

Brian Fargo worked on the original and now he's back as InXile Entertainment CEO and founder to revive the series.

So what connects this game to the original? Well, they both have Bards. "Seriously, the genre has changed so much in the last 10 years, we needed to take a completely fresh approach," Fargo explains.

This fresh approach includes using Dark Alliance's Snowblind engine and making the Bard a wise-ar-se on a scale rarely seen in RPG games.

"The genre mocking came about from playing all the latest RPGs and seeing the same quests and dry writing being done to death. After 20 years of killing the rats in the cellar and finding the skeleton key, I felt it was enough," Fargo says.

"Much of the humour came



about once we defined the character as someone who was cynical, a bit selfish and reacted to the world like someone who had just played TOO many RPGs. The humour really flowed once we defined him; and in many ways the story and scenes started to write themselves."

On the subject of defining the Bard, we should mention that Cary Elwes, of Princess Bride and Robin Hood: Men in Tights fame, has signed on to give him voice so delivering dry wit shouldn't be a problem.

Besides new attitude, this new tale also has a few other surprises. This time around the Bard doesn't bother recruiting, he magically summons ally creatures instead, giving him a wide rotation of skills to play with, without having to scour bars for seedy necromancers.

Other new twists include ditching the need to fill your pack with useless nick-knacks to sell at town fair, now the game looks at what you have and automatically converts the stuff you don't need into silver. It's like magical E-bay, I guess.

The Bard's Tale is shaping up to contain everything a modern remake should: nostalgia, a new attitude that mocks the traditions that made it popular in the first place, and at least one Men in Tights joke.

Timothy C. Best



NAUGHTY OR NICE

Instead of dialogue trees where players guess what the devs want them to say, Bard's Tale gives players the choice of Snarky or Nice and then lets rip with the appropriate back-and-forth banter. It's not fair; you just know that the best lines are going to cause the most trouble (some of which won't manifest for several hours).



AT A GLANCE
It's like Baldur's Gate but starring a Daria-style wise-ass as the lead character.



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Elder Scrolls Oblivion

Bethesda shows us how to age gracefully

Developer: Bethesda Publisher: Bethesda Distributor: TBC Due: TBC

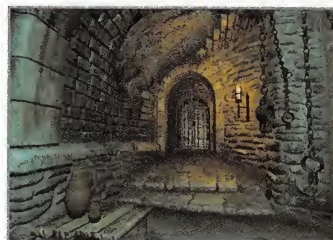
Your Emperor has been murdered by an assassin, the throne lies empty and its vacant state invites the gates of Hell to open and spill forth its minions to destroy the land and all you hold dear. What do you do? Whatever the heck you want to do, actually, this is an Elder Scrolls game after all. Fresh from the success of Morrowind and its expansions, Bethesda has finally announced the fourth installment of The Elder Scrolls series, Oblivion.

As the opening line of this preview suggests, Oblivion takes place just after the Emperor has been assassinated and Oblivion (the Elder Scrolls version of Hell) is making its move on greater Tamriel. You start off in Cyrodill, the capital province of the land, and are tasked with finding a hidden heir to the throne and unraveling the sinister plot that led to the Emperor's death. From there on in, in true Elder Scrolls style, it is entirely up to you.

The previous Elder Scrolls games have always been ambitious and Oblivion certainly follows suit. "Since starting this project two years ago, our goal has been to create the quintessential RPG of the next generation," says Todd Howard, The Elder Scrolls executive producer. "We looked back at what we had done with the series, and then looked ahead to what the future of video games could be, and we think this is it."

With the previous game's expansive environments and a whole new AI system to govern NPC behaviour, Howard may end up on the money.

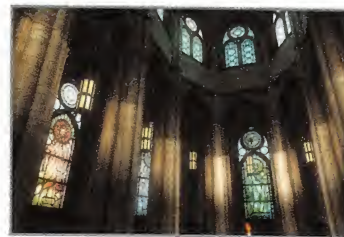
Oblivion also looks the business. As you can see by the screenshots on this page, Bethesda is creating something truly breathtaking. From the lovingly rendered character models (a massive step up from the motley crew we saw in Morrowind) to the expansive yet luscious fields and forests, Oblivion has the potential



to be one of the best looking games ever.

If the new elements going into Oblivion can address some of the issues that plagued Morrowind we could be looking at what has the potential to be THE genre defining RPG. If not we will most likely still have a brilliant role playing game for the fans of the genre.

Nathan Cocks



One aspect of Oblivion that is particularly enticing is its new NPC AI system. NPCs now have a level of autonomy instead of acting like lifeless placeholders. Based on the environment around them and their own agendas you will see NPCs go have meals, sleep, go to church or even steal.



AT A GLANCE
It's like Morrowind meets Black and White, without the poo throwing.



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THUS SPAKE POWERPLAY
Compiled by Timothy C. Best

10 Commandments of Role-Playing Design



Role-Playing Games seemed like a natural choice to leap onto computer screens. You had all of the rules and mechanics already written out for you, all that was left to be done was scan in some art work from the pen-and-paper game books and write some dialogue for NPCs.

In those early days we had the likes of Ultima, the Gold Box D&D games, Bard's Tale, Wizardry and even Might & Magic. By the 90s it seemed that RPGs had had

their day. Labyrinths and lizards didn't shine quite as brightly and if you couldn't top 1985's Ultima IV, why bother?

In 1994, Looking Glass's brilliant System Shock slipped by, sadly unnoticed and unplayed, while Doom rocked worlds. It took three games in 1997 and 1998 to catapult computerised role-playing games back into the limelight. They were: Diablo, Fallout and Baldur's Gate. Diablo exploited the joys of RPG hack-and-slash, Fallout reminded us of freedom through character development and Baldur's Gate

starred vibrant party interaction. Since then we have seen the highs of Planescape Torment, Deus Ex and Morrowind and the lows of Mistmare and round one of Ultima IX.

As RPG developers gear up for the next level of interactivity and artificial intelligence we'd like to lay down our PCPP commandments for RPG design – because lord knows better technology does not equal better role-playing – and we sure as hell don't want to have to wait for Diablo 4 to revive the genre.

THOU SHALT NOT...

1

Make each mission based on the working life of a US postal worker.

Killing things and delivering mail is not the high-water mark of RPG quest design. What it is, is an incredibly cheap way to move players from plot point A to plot point B. With Ultima IV, this stuff should have disappeared in the mid 80s. My favourite is when NPCs give player characters, that they've never seen before, super-secret missions after they appear with some herbs. It's just sad.



2

Make us collect Rat skins for two gold pieces at a time.

In RPG games, we've been taught to grab as much as we can get, or pay for it later. That training means that giving players an incentive to do something mind-numbing and repetitive will incite them to do it until their mind is numb and your game is repetitive. This also covers giving players a skill increase from jumping on the spot...



3

If you are going to make a party-based RPG - with dreams of recreating that pen-and-paper feel - then make sure that the guys you provide as hired help actually help.

They don't help if they regularly: shoot their own guys in the back, trip every trap, attract every monster possible or waste the Scroll of Ultimate Power on the Liche King's doorman. Don't give party members repetitive sayings or incessant whining, unless players can end them in a painful manner.



THOU SHALT...

1

Hire a writer.

Create a central story-line that gives the character a place in the world and gives the character a reason to get off bed in the morning. Create NPCs that are interesting enough for players to care if they live or die. Give players enough to create their own reasons to go on missions, whether it is because they want enough money to get into the side show or because they want to find out more about their floating skull companion.



2

Create a reward system where the peril equals the pay-off and players always have more appealing options than vermin control or excessive hopping.

If you have a system that gives a good incentive to collect 150 rat pelts you might want to try creating some game content instead. Gambling mini-games, tournament battles, racing, busking and about a gazillion other options all spring to mind without even going near a story arc.



3

Make NPC party members genuinely interesting, with a personality of their own and a back-story.

The Baldur's Gate series gave players complete control of their party but made sure that they still had opinions, pet peeves, romances and, generally, something going on beyond the endless butt kicking for goodness. The player's character is the only one that needs to be an empty vessel; everyone else should bring more than a damage modifier when they come to play.



THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALT NOT

1 Make everything dependent on random rolls, strategy counts.

2 Be afraid to allow a non-combat skill to short cut a mission. It's all about swings and roundabouts.

3 Rail road characters into situations they might not be ready for. Side quests and random encounters are our friend.

4 Force players into frenzied clicking. If there's action there should also be less frantic options as well.

5 Give us the same result no matter what dialogue options we choose.

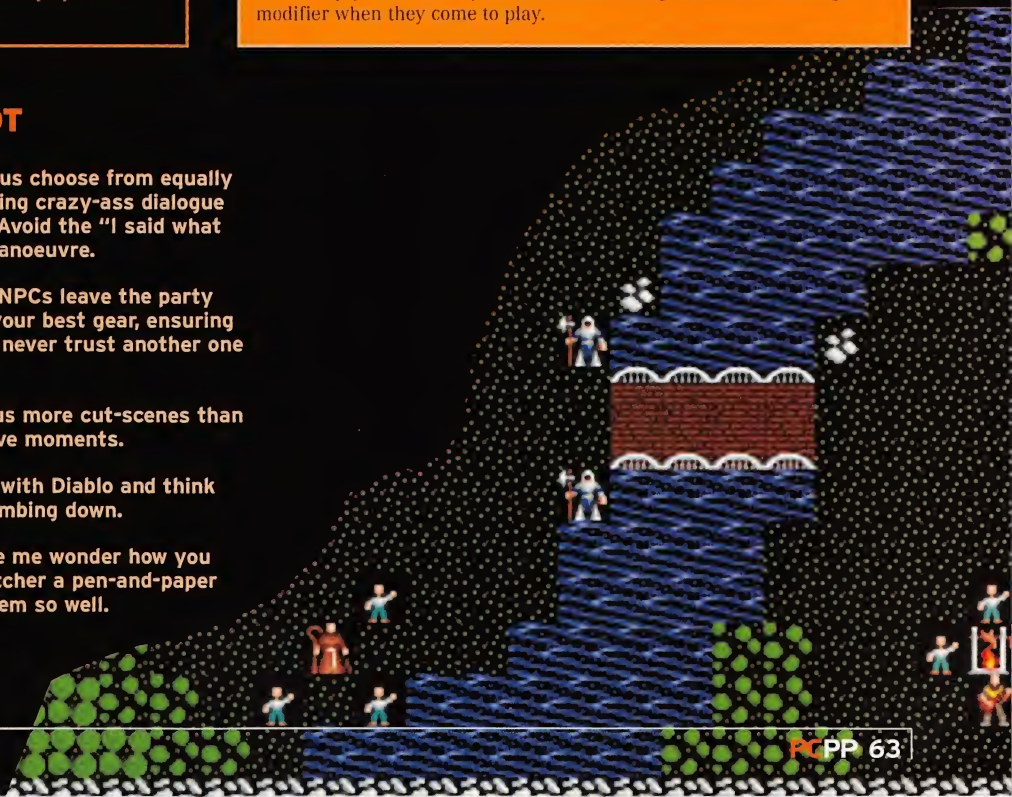
6 Make us choose from equally unappealing crazy-ass dialogue options. Avoid the "I said what now?" manoeuvre.

7 Have NPCs leave the party with all your best gear, ensuring that you never trust another one again.

8 Give us more cut-scenes than interactive moments.

9 Start with Diablo and think about dumbing down.

10 Make me wonder how you could butcher a pen-and-paper rule system so well.



THOU SHALT NOT...

4

Force players to be a warrior no matter what it says next to class.

If you give players the chance to play a fast-talking con-man or inventor you better darn well let players sweet talk people or build stuff. While you're at it you need to give them ways to complete missions and gain experience using these non-combat skills, otherwise these character aren't real options; they are ways to punish people for trying to avoid your lovingly-crafted hack and slash.

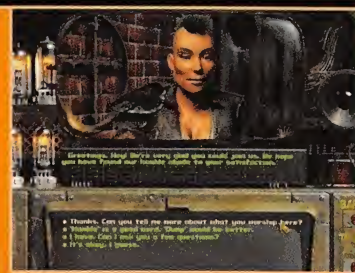


THOU SHALT...

4

Give players multiple paths through each mission and multiple ways to solve every problem.

If you do need the Sword of Doom to kill something then give us the chance to con the local braggart into wielding it or build a sword-throwing device to give a mouthy demon a nasty surprise. Ultimately, you want a game that makes people want to post blogs on how cool their character is, and how they nailed Monster-tronic with a paint brush and a taco.



5

Make every game's mechanics a living tribute to a 30-year-old pen-and-paper game.

We all love Strength, Dex and Con and set experience levels but that doesn't mean there isn't something better and, hopefully, computers can run systems that are beyond the scope of a human DM with 10-sided dice and math homework. Just take a sneak peak at what Pete and his Xbox team have done with Fable. Their system is organic, flexible, visual and still gives you the power. Beautiful.



5

Give players enough information to make informed choices.

That means giving us a peak behind the scenes so that we can figure out whether Bonky is missing because of unlucky rolls or unlucky choice of ammunition. Players also need sign-posts letting them know how they should skew character advancement to tackle the obstacles in a way that suits their play style and their ideas about who Bonky really is. Trial and error isn't rarely equals explosive fun.



6

Think that bigger is always better.

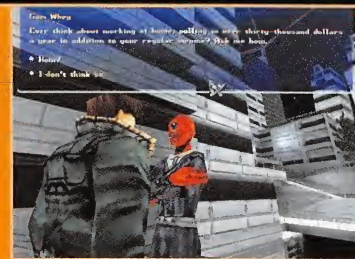
If bigger is blander, it's not better. Random world generators are great when they add uncertainty to a world. They suck when they are the world. Having an endless vista to explore isn't as fun as it sounds if every random adventure leaves you feeling like you've walked in half-way through an art house movie and every location features your cousin's house three times over.



6

Populate your world so that there is something interesting around every corner.

If you make players search three maps before they find something exciting -building suspense - then you had better deliver something more impressive than a goblin shopkeeper or random cave troll. Events, characters and memorable moments make for great exploration; twenty minutes pushing the forwards key just makes for sore fingers.



THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALT...

1 Allow characters to take their gear into sequels

2 Work on the multiplayer side of things. Playing with friends can be da bomb.

3 Give stats like Int and Wis a purpose in the game, beyond a couple of bonus points to herbalism.

4 Reward players for going off the beaten track and taking skills that might not be practical, but are character-driven.

5 Use NPCs to tell the story and foreshadow future events.

6 Hire a writer, proof reader, professional voice talent and game testers.

7 Give players plenty of ways to customise their Jockobo's appearance, weapons, and spells to give them ownership of their characters.

8 Include integrated mini-games to break up the behind-the-scenes dice rolling.

9 Take a sneak peak at Peter Molyneux's Fable on Xbox

10 Make combat more interesting than left-click, left-click, left-click.

THOU SHALT NOT...

7

Listen when people tell you that your superhero or spy RPG will never work.

Nor should you make another RPG with elves, dwarves and middle-of-the-road humans ... unless the game has the D&D logo and Wizards of the Coast is paying for it. I love a cliché as much as the next guy but if my orphaned character turns out to be part of an ancient sorcerous/royal/demonic bloodline I'll think I'll just go and rescue a princess or something.



8

Accept that technology peaked with Bard's Tale.

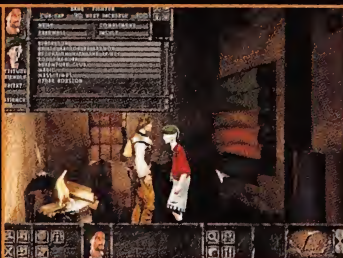
Try some new things, use a new engine, build technology that suits the genre. Work out some way to make dialogue trees more fun, and don't be afraid to use a 3D, first-person engine if you want to. Heck, license a DOOM 3 or Half-Life 2 engine and go nuts. Just because RPG players need a decent story, doesn't mean we want load screens, second-rate interfaces, crawling frame-rates or graphics that make our eyes bleed.



9

Force players to talk to absolutely everyone, read every book, and pick up every fork to open the next door.

While you have every right to be proud of your stunning world, no-one likes a show off, and no-one likes getting stuck on screen 47 because you missed talking to Yavic, who looks identical to Gavic and Slavic, who were all standing in line for a Lover of Triplet's support meeting. Exploration is one thing; taking a census is another.



10

Believe that step, fight, step, fight, step, fight, equals a climax.

From the earliest days of CRPGs designers seem to have decided that they've given away too much healing power and the best way to foil cautious players is to give them a series of uninterrupted battles leading up to the boss. We want to feel like we've accomplished something with a climax, we don't want to require (or acquire) a compulsive disorder to get there.



THOU SHALT...

7

Create worlds that are familiar enough not to need an interpreter but are different enough to make us really wonder what's living under the stairs.

It doesn't just have to be sci-fi or fantasy. Freedom Force nailed golden-age superheroes, Jagged Alliance 2 took on the mercenary feel and Anachronox messed with a bit of everything. Give me a martial arts RPG, a Roman political thriller, or a rockstar spy story. Just give the goblins a break, okay?



8

Do technology properly.

Just because you've licensed the Source Engine doesn't mean that you have to include first-person shooter action sequences or that your inventory screen needs to look like something from Quake.

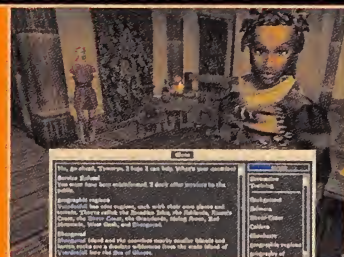
You talk to a lot of people and fiddle with a lot of items in RPG games and your interface needs to reflect that. If you do get creative, make sure everything works before you ship it ... I'm look at you Ultima IX.



9

Have a continuous set of clear objectives for player to investigate.

While players want to make their own way through a game, they also want to be doing something more meaningful than running in circles. If you have riddles and mysteries to be solved, then make sure you've got enough other stuff happening to keep players interested if they get stuck. In fact, there should be no way to get stuck, only side-tracked.




10

Give players a leading role.

Since Deus Ex, there's no excuse why our character's actions shouldn't resonant throughout their game world. We want some kind of internal consistency that makes the guys we've pissed off come after us, dead characters not to be gone from plot-progressing cut-scenes and, if we want to bump off the friendly merchant, we want in-game consequences or good reasons why we can't. We want a world that role-plays with us.



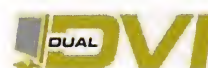


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GAMES IN REVIEW

Starting this column I had originally planned to make mention of how we're now seeing the first of the pre-Christmas rush make their way onto store shelves and into our review pages. I was then planning to proceed to say that this issue's batch of excellent titles makes up for what has thus far seemed a fairly uninspiring year.

But of course, upon reflection, such claims are slightly wide of the mark. 2004 has been a fantastic year for some gamers, especially first-person shooter fans. From UT2004 to Call of Duty: United Offensive via Far Cry, Painkiller, Battlefield Vietnam and DOOM 3, we've had it pretty good as far as shooting stuff is concerned. Not even Creed could spoil the party. (Creed, the band, might have dulled our enthusiasm but fortunately they chose not to release a game.)

However, other genres have struggled to keep up the pace. Aside from last month's Codename Panzers, strategy titles have been left wanting in both quantity and - to a greater extent - quality. This issue sees that balance redressed with half a dozen games exploring a variety of avenues within the broad strategy genre.

Rome: Total War and The Sims 2 are the obvious stand-outs. The former poses the most severe threat we've seen to the crown worn by Sid Meier's Civilization; the latter is perhaps the most perfect digital playground in existence. Any serious PC gamer should own both titles.

Elsewhere, Timegate Studios continues to produce quietly brilliant RTS games in its Kohan



Game of the Month
Rome: Total War

68

series, while Evil Genius, Etherlords 2 and even Chessmaster 10000 all have something to recommend them.

Whether you prefer to shoot first or contemplate that question, it's clearly a good time to be a PC gamer. Who says we have to wait until Christmas for a good game?

David Wildgoose,
Editor

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GOLD AWARD	HIGH DISTINCTION	DISTINCTION	CREDIT	PASS	FAIL
The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.	This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.	An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.	Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.	A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.	There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.
90+	85-100	75-84	65-74	50-64	0-49



Rome Total War

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE ROME...

Developer: Creative Assembly ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Distributor: Activision ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

Win 98SE/ME/XP/
2000
1GHz CPU
256 MB RAM
64MB video card

WANT

2GHz CPU
512MB RAM
256MB video card

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.deadromans.com
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In 218 BC, Hannibal found himself faced with a massive Roman consular army that outnumbered his smaller more experienced force. Rather than shrug his shoulders and head all the way back home across the mountains for a nice cup of yak mead, Hannibal was instead inspired to get the tactical upper hand.

With two thousand of his men tucked away out of sight amongst the trees, Hannibal sent a small band of Numidian cavalry towards the Roman encampment with direct orders to thumb their noses and then hightail it back, luring the entire Roman force out in pursuit. Although the Roman army was much larger, by the time they had followed Hannibal's men (the bait) back across the River Trebia, they were rather wet and tired – sufficiently demoralised for Hannibal's men to have a fighting chance.

Once the Romans were lured into the gully - the wet leather chafing their inner thighs and all that (ewww) - Hannibal's forces attacked. With the main body of infantry attacking the Romans directly, Hannibal's fearsome Elephants created panic on the flanks, whilst the hidden cavalry surprised the Romans from the rear. The plan worked and the Romans were routed, handing the hairy Hun his first major victory of the second Punic War. Pretty cool, huh?

Whilst Trebia is the nifty battle that most of you will have played in the Rome: Total War demo, it barely scratches the surface of what this immense game has to offer. Yes, the third installment in the Total War series throws down the gauntlet. Have you the mettle?

executing unconventional battle tactics and lapping up the visual feast of swarms of units hacking each other to pieces. So how does Rome take the series further? By re-writing the entire engine so that the game is deeper on the strategy plane and even more alive in the battle simulation -

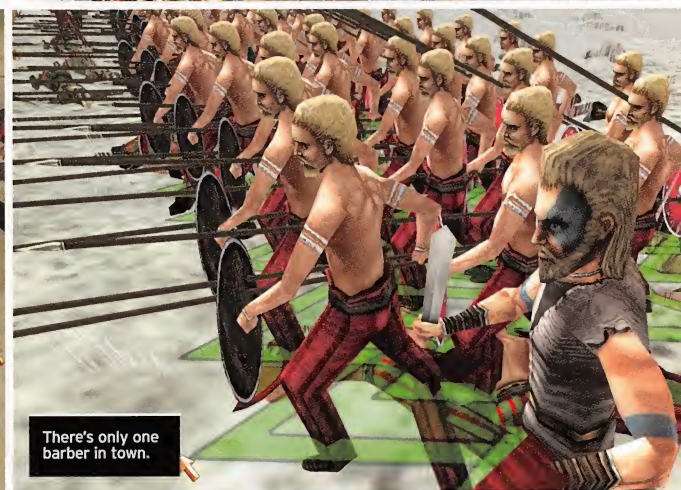
The campaign map has been significantly enhanced, making this a deeper experience

The Rise and Rise of Rome

Medieval: Total War was one of those games that engulfed lives. The single player game was an engrossing combination of (effectively) two games - a bristling real-time battle sim and an immersive turn-based game of resource management and civilisation expansion. You could spend weeks simply managing your domination of Europe, sending out spies and assassins, making and breaking alliances, building up territories and taxing the bejesus out of your citizens in order to fund your ever advancing army, without ever touching a single real-time battle. On the other hand, whole evenings could be spent in the battle engine

a task that Creative Assembly has achieved with surprising deftness.

As you've all seen from the screenshots, the new 3D engine looks absolutely spectacular. But this isn't just a souped-up, glamour puss version of Medieval - the main campaign map has had just as many significant enhancements, making this a deeper experience than any Total War game before it. Clearly, Rome: Total War now challenges Civilization III for the mantle of "best strategy game ever". And the Civ comparison isn't just an idle reference - when you see how the new campaign operates, you'll understand how Creative Assembly has quite obviously looked to Sid Meier's opus for inspiration.



well as with the people – for example, to blockade a certain port, or take a particular city. This gives the campaign yet another layer of purpose apart from your own goal of complete dominance. Now you'll be tempted to stray outside your own objectives in order to please the Senate and receive rewards, like special units (ooh goody, Gladiators!), money, or more tempting offers.

You can now zoom in and out of the campaign map in order to keep track of all the units, cities, and information on screen. There's a lovely level of detail here, allowing you to see where paved roads have been built (complete with little traders traveling between cities), icons highlighting resources (pottery, marble, textiles, glass etc.), the sites of heroic battles that you've won, naval trading routes, exactly where specific units are camped within the provinces



As Rome: Total War is set around 12 BC, you initially play as one of three Roman factions – the house of Julii, Brutii or Scipii (later on you'll unlock Germania, the Greeks, Carthage, Egypt, the Britons, Parthia, the Seleucid and more) – with the Roman Senate playing a large part in your ultimate pursuit of becoming Emperor.

Aside from the objectives you set for yourself whilst expanding your rule, the Senate will issue you with special missions that can be completed in order to raise your standing in the Senate as

WAR? GIVE ME WINE!

A welcome return to Rome are the traits that apply to leaders under your command. As they age, your leaders acquire personality traits that affect their ability to command armies or manage cities. For example, a leader who is a 'Social Drinker' celebrates with the troops after battle, giving him a +1 in command; likewise he may have a 'Cold Manner' which is a -2 influence but a 200% increase cost to bribe. This adds a whole layer of depth as to how you utilise your family members. Hearing a cowardly leader give his pre-battle speech is hilarious, as he inadvertently tells his men how little chance they have to survive against the apparently more skilled and fearsome opponents!





HELP ME OUT HERE...

Whilst Rome has a good tutorial in the form of a Prologue campaign, the advisor is a constant fixture that you can dismiss whenever you're no longer in need of help. Whilst info bubbles pop up to help guide you through each process of the game, you can also switch the advisor to a purely voice-only guide, allowing you to hear her pipe in with advice every now and then as you play. It's an excellent system, and is complimented with the male advisor in the battles (who sounds somewhat like Russell Crowe's Gladiator).

during each turn and even events such as erupting volcanoes.

The terrain you see on the campaign map now directly relates to the battle engine, and plays a large part in your strategic thinking, as any of the provinces can now be traversed by any unit at any time, allowing free movement of



diplomats and armies across borders (though beware of angry neighbours who might not like you snooping around). Camping troops on the edge of forested areas will even allow you to ambush passing armies, as units must travel the world map logically - going around mountains and across bridges, and so forth. You can also build forts and watchtowers, with the former essential to blocking the path of enemy armies to your inner provinces. Armies can now be loaded onto naval vessels for quick travel across expanses of water to nearby territories.

Basically, the world map is alive with all the factions going about their own nefarious business, rather than the more linear Risk-like expansion of Medieval.

The new interface also makes it extremely easy to keep track of your faction's progress, the Senate, your ongoing diplomatic ties, family tree, and the basic (or should that be, complex)

turn-to-turn management of your cities. Info tabs such as the building browser also give you a quick and easy reference to what buildings can be built in each city and what is required, such as how to go from a Governor's house to an Imperial palace, or a Wooden Palisade to an Epic Stone Wall. Units that have taken losses in battle can now be retrained at any city, their armour and weapons getting upgraded if the city they are in has better facilities - such as a forge - than the city they were initially trained in. Detail, detail, detail - Rome is packed with it.

Give Me Your Finest Pigs!

Diplomacy has been thoroughly enhanced and is now more engrossing than ever - cue the new Civ-inspired options. Shuffle your little diplomat onto another faction's unit and a screen pops up allowing you to issue a series of demands or make an offer in the hope of getting something in return. For example, you could bundle the



These Melbourne Cup Imports look tough.

NEED A SOCIAL LIFE?

If the enormous campaign is too much for your demanding social calendar, you can also play a Quick Campaign, where you only need capture 15 provinces and outlast a particular faction. Of course, whilst that's all very handy, who can resist the temptation to rule over the entire map and dismantle the Senate, declaring yourself Emperor? If time is short, you can also choose to play a variety of cool set-piece Historical Battles, such as the battle of River Trebia, the battle of Lake Trasimene, the battle of Telamon, the siege of Gergovia, the battle of Carrhae, the Siege of Sparta, and more.



CHAAARRRRRRRGE!



request for map information with an offer of a regular monetary tribute, or ask for a ceasefire and offer open trade and see what your marauding enemy wants in return for leaving you alone. If it's an army unit you've approached, you can even bribe them into dispersing into the wilderness so as to take the heat out of a particular province.

This whole raft of new diplomatic options complements the way regions can now be traversed by any faction's units, allowing you to get out and tie up deals with factions far away from home. Now you can foster a heart of trade and have your armies seep out to your outlying regions, only prodding forth into enemy territory when you feel you have the might to get the job done.

There's a lot more to do in Rome, but the game also comes with new auto-management features so you can automate the bits that you can't be arsed with - another cool feature, but we doubt most of you won't want to deliberate over all the finer details for hours on end, such is the enjoyment of doing so.



Camping troops on the edge of forested areas will even allow you to ambush passing armies

Of course, what would Total War be without its amazing new battle engine? Whilst the basic interface feels familiar, there are powerful enhancements here - such as improved camera controls - that make fighting it out more enjoyable. The battles are bigger, better and more entertaining than any previous Total War game, making it more tempting to fight it out than to allow the CPU to auto-resolve the outcome on the campaign map.

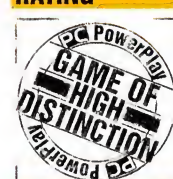
New units can use special abilities to help turn the tide of battle, from specific mounted units that can perform the Cantabrian circle (where units fire projectiles and peel off one by one to reload, maintaining a constant barrage of fire), to archers using flaming arrows (likewise, Onagers can fling burning projectiles) and the infamous Tortoise formation of the Legionnaires, amongst other cool unit abilities. With such an incredible array of units, there's plenty of scope for some truly astounding battles and some very creative tactics.

Zooming in on the action and moving about the battle, you'll hear the sound shift and blend to represent exactly what is taking place. You only need gawk at the screenshots on these pages to appreciate the level of visual detail that exists in the game, but you need to play it to understand just how the brilliant sound effects and enormous amount of speech bring the game's battles to life. Last but not least, Rome has a superb and inspiring soundtrack, from an ominous main theme to gorgeous incidental music that accompanies your time spent on the campaign map.

Rome: Total War is both immense and immensely satisfying. It's a strategy game that can be appreciated on so many different levels that you'll be glued to discovering its intricacies for weeks - or months - on end. A new classic that really has been worth every moment spent pining for it.

Eliot Fish

RATING



FOR

Looks & sounds fantastic
More Civ-like campaign
Addictive as Tim Tams
Complex and satisfying
battle engine

AGAINST

You won't see daylight
for weeks
You'll have to stock up
the fridge
Showering requires
pausing the game

OVERALL

Creative Assembly has
upped the ante once
more. Rome: Total War
is the ultimate in PC
gaming.

95



The Sims 2

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBOURHOOD...



Developer: Maxis ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1GHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB videocard
3.5GB HDD

WANT

3GHz CPU
128MB Videocard
512MB Ram

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

thesims2.ea.com/
The hub. A great touchstone to expand the horizons of the most jaded Sim.

What you get with the Sims is something like a magic pop-up book. You open one page and this oddball soap opera is playing and what's weird is that you're the voice the crazy characters hear in their heads. Open another page and you're playing Queer Eye for the Simulated Guy. Try another and you're looking in a reflection of yourself that's hilarious, tense and a little disturbing all at the same time.

The first Sims game gave you a taste of all of this but the sequel does it all so

much better. The Sims 2 takes the roughly sketched lines from the first and goes over them with slashing inkwork and fills the spaces with digitally-enhanced colour.

Before I get any further into my already glowing review, I have to state for the record that the Sims is like some kind of fun-producing illness and some people are just immune. The idea of waking up a simulated dude, having him go to the bathroom, eat breakfast, go to work, come home, workout, scramble to call some

friends, go to bed and then repeat will drive some people nuts.

If you're busy trying to "powerlevel" your Sims out of their social rating slump, then you're not likely to sit and watch conversations or dramas unfolds, and if you just want to pump up your environment score then it makes sense to randomly cram your Sim houses with all the highest rated stuff, even if it produces a scene that would make the Queer Eye team fall to the ground clutching their heads. Playing like this, the Sims becomes a decent, but short term time management and building strategy game. Like that, it's nothing to write home about.

If, on the other hand, you're willing to listen to the stories your little Sims tell, fill in a couple of blanks, and maybe even indulge a Queer Eye creative fantasy or two, then a little something like The Sims 2 becomes much more than the sum of its parts.

Not that the new parts are to be sniffed at...

The Inner Tony Robbins

For years players have managed their Sims' needs (in the form of Hunger, Comfort, Bladder, Energy, Fun, Social, Hygiene and Environment) as well as finding the time to build the virtual skills required to excel in their Sim jobs of choice.

Fears and desires spin like symbols on a one-arm bandit as your character's mood shifts



Hey honey, do I look fat in this?



IT'S IN THE GENES

Okay, so you can have kids, but how do you work out what they look like and what type of person they are? Well, it's all a matter of genetics. Yes, the game will look at the personality and appearance of the parents and then blend them together in the child. It's strangely very cool. Of course, like many things in the Sims this is something you can use to evil effect. For example you can make the two most hideous freaks imaginable by abusing the character creation slider and then breed them together with mutant babies as the goal. And the mutants shall inherit the earth.

Well, The Sims 2 takes that basic formula and turns it on its head by giving each Sim their very own dreams. When you create a Sim you can make them a Family, Career, Knowledge, Romance or Popularity Sim. This choice defines what a Sim values in life and it contributes towards a daily list of passionate desires and deepest fears. If Sims make their dream come true they will live longer, have better luck, and can even have their needs deflected by being on cloud nine.

Having their worst nightmares come into being have the opposite effect and can send you into tears, ceaseless mumbling and psychiatric help. Every time you wake to a new day, or you fulfil one or the other, fears and desires spin like symbols on a one-arm bandit as your character's mood shifts.

What's really cool about these Aspirations is that they reflect what is going on in a game. For example, lonely Sims will want to meet new people, then once they get friendships going they'll get a desire to flirt with certain Sims, and then Kiss them and so on. Keep in mind, these are only desires, if a Sim isn't good for you, you can stay away from them, meet someone new and hope that you "feel that way" about them instead. Having a desire to do something combined with a fear of failure adds some

pressure-cooker drama to Sim life and, beyond that, these wants have two great side-effects: one is that Sims react from even more complex motivations, producing even more interesting behaviour, but they also mean that the developer could take the gameplay focus off the basic needs. This means that once you set things up the Sims will largely take care of themselves, of course, they'll still need you to help make their dreams come true and they still suck at juggling friends, but it's a huge improvement.

Graphic Expression

The next big addition to the game is the new graphics engine that leaves the first magic pop-up book in the dust. It shines as you see your Sim's hand-crafted face move through a huge variety of brilliantly animated and exaggerated expressions. If you imagine a world where everyone pulled faces like Jim Carry and you add a little more Disney-cartoon action you start to hit the right ballpark.

Overall, the animation in the game rocks, and it really brings the Sims to life like never before. When my Sim-girlfriend decided to play on the couch my friend bounced in time, with perfect little jolts and bounces, as she jumped up and down and even threw in some back-flips.

The range of animations, activities and

nice little touches is amazing. For example, if you go to the community pool – there are now community areas that Sims can go to hang out with their friends like pools, arcades and shopping centres – you'll see a Sim with no points in the Body skill wobble on the diving board and then just fall off the end. A character with the stat maxed out will strut onto the board, give it a big bounce, and then spring off it with a forward somersault

Tim hard at work on his Sims 2 review.





before gracefully hitting the water. Just playing around with this stuff is a lot of fun, but on an even more basic level, just watching a Sim talk to another character gives you clues as to both their personality and their relationships. This comes in pretty handy considering the difference between gaining points from fulfilling a desire and losing by realising a fear can come down to choosing who you want to try tickling.

It's subtle but it's powerful... especially when you create your friends and let them loose together. Take one part uncanny and two parts hilarity and that's what you end up with.

Simulicious

Logically you know that each Sim is controlled by some simple and often conflicting desires. You know that any weird behaviour comes from the sum of these simple urges. It's sort of like how a single ant doesn't know anything, but ant hives manage all sorts of clever things.

What makes this game rock is when illusion takes over and you just don't care. It gives you real drama where Sims react to totally odd situations in such human ways that it can make you burst out laughing or get you more than a little sad.

In my game, I married the first hottie who showed interest and liked sci-fi (you have to have standards). I figured, "What the heck, it's all in the name of science". Later I divorced her after finding her in bed with Dan, her first love. I figured I'd enjoy the life of a footloose and fancy-free bachelor.

OVAL OF LIFE

Sims now age and grow. You can follow generations of the suckers. You can raise a family and nurture them from babies, to toddlers, into children, teens and then adulthood. You can scramble to them into the best schools, help them with homework and even force them into low-paying jobs as teenagers. As they grow they gain different stat points and eventually you get to choose an Aspiration path for them. At the end of a Sim's life they even leave an inheritance, which leads to lots of good story options. For those who don't want their Sims to age the manual provides you with the no-aging cheat free of charge and there's always the Elixir of Life...

It didn't quite work that way. All of my desires and fears stayed locked on her. I'd keep getting "Kiss Nina," "Flirt with Nina" urges and then a couple too many urges to "Call Nina". I checked my relationship bar with her, and on a scale of +100 to -100, I was -96.

I hated the woman but I couldn't stop thinking about her. Sure, I was so mad that I would get out of the bed every time she got into it, but I still wanted her back. Add in the thoughts that appeared above Sim Tim's head and the bursts of sobbing following them, and it was actually more than a touch tragic.

It's not quite as tragic as when a Sim child stops outside of cheating Mommy's room, thinks of her and starts sobbing, but it was pretty tough on Sim Tim.

It's not all sad, and comedy elements come in endless forms, like when a friend I simmed-up hooked up with a girl for Woo-Hoo (yes there's woo-hoo in the game). Afterwards, we see his face pop up in her thoughts, and then it's all just a little bit too perfect when we look across and see



his face pop up in her thoughts as well.

There are lots of little moments like this and time and time again you'll wonder how much of the game is random and how much is programmed. I started getting paranoid at one stage. I kept calling this one Sim on the phone, but every time I rang I was told that he was out by his sister. Pretty soon I was convinced that the guy was just dodging me.

If you give yourself over to the game for just a day or two you'll see dramas unfold

around you that would make the writers of Bold and Beautiful, Passions or professional wrestling green with envy.

To Sim it All Up

The Sims is a great sequel and a great game in its own right. Its bag of tricks is so deep that I've only pulled out the items on the top. I should elaborate on things like being able to create neighbourhood layouts in SimCity 4, the three themed neighbourhoods that come with the game, the Sims memories that you can check to tick off their highs and lows, and even the renovated house design tools (featuring balconies, decks and useful diagonal walls), but there's just not enough space.

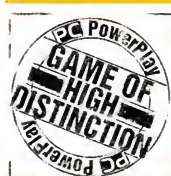
Let's just say that The Sims 2 outshines the first in every way, except possibly one.

If you compare the number of objects to your current game with endless things from expansions and downloaded off the net, Sims 2 is going to look light, but EA has integrated a bunch of tools into the game which will make sharing and finding gear easier than ever, so you can expect the goodies to flow for this game even more freely than it did for the first.

If you couldn't see the magic before then chances are you'll be baffled once again, but if you know the pleasures of the Sim, then this sequel is all of that and a ball of wax.

Timothy C. Best

RATING



FOR

It's a deep and layered Sim experience that improves on the first in every way.

AGAINST

If you didn't get it the first time, there's just more not to get; High system specs.

OVERALL

Touches of magic shine through the everyday life of Sim-suburbia

92

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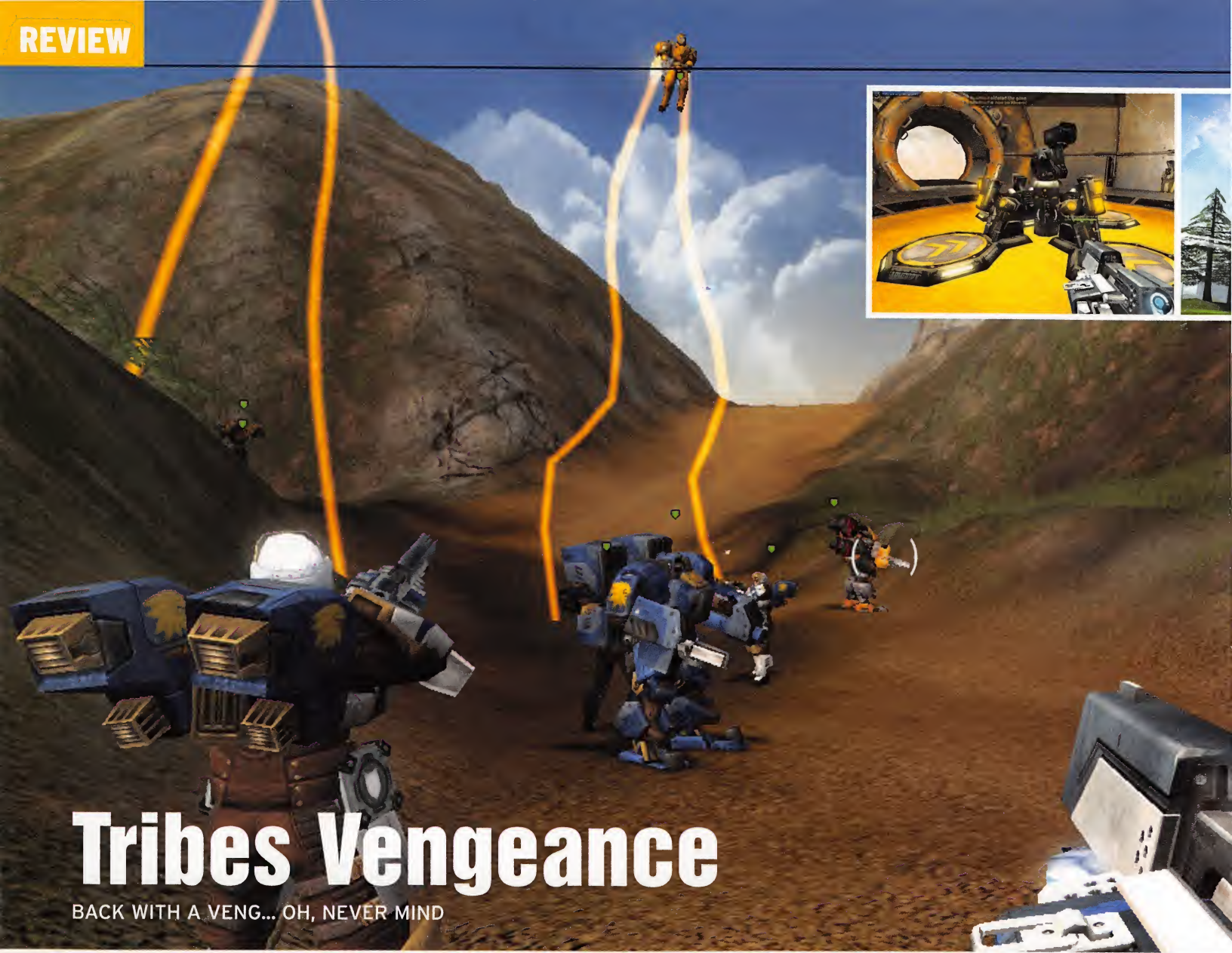


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THE
AV
CHANNEL



Tribes Vengeance

BACK WITH A VENG... OH, NEVER MIND

Developer: Irrational Games ■ Publisher: Vivendi Universal ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1GHz CPU
256MB RAM
32 MB DX9.0c
videocard
1GB HDD

WANT

2GHz CPU
512MB RAM
128MB DX9.0c
videocard
Broadband

MULTIPLAYER

Of course!

ONLINE

www.tribesvengeance.com/us

The Tribes series has quite a history in the online multiplayer area. When the original game launched, it supported more players than almost everything on the market as well as delivering awesome lag-resistance for what were almost universally dial-up players at the time.

Fast-forward to 2004. Vehicles in games are commonplace, lag-resistance is a prerequisite and wide open spaces are not something you can tout with pride on the packaging. Tribes Vengeance looks like a game that was released this year, but it retains a certain old-school flavour. There's something refreshing and compelling about the gameplay, which harks from the nineties era of gaming.

Tribes players are traditionally the cream of the hardcore. Basically because in Tribes, every single man is a flying, fast moving target. And you don't really have the tools to easily shoot him out of the sky. No: Tribes weapons require a high level of operator skill.

You have an unguided "spinfusion" explosive disc launcher and a machine gun which peppers ammo all over Creation, repeating at only a moderate rate of fire. While opponents can reach speeds that exceed dozens of kilometres per hour, as they rocket overhead. In

Tribes, your enemies take a lot of killing. And the only way to do it better is with practice, practice, practice.

Airborne

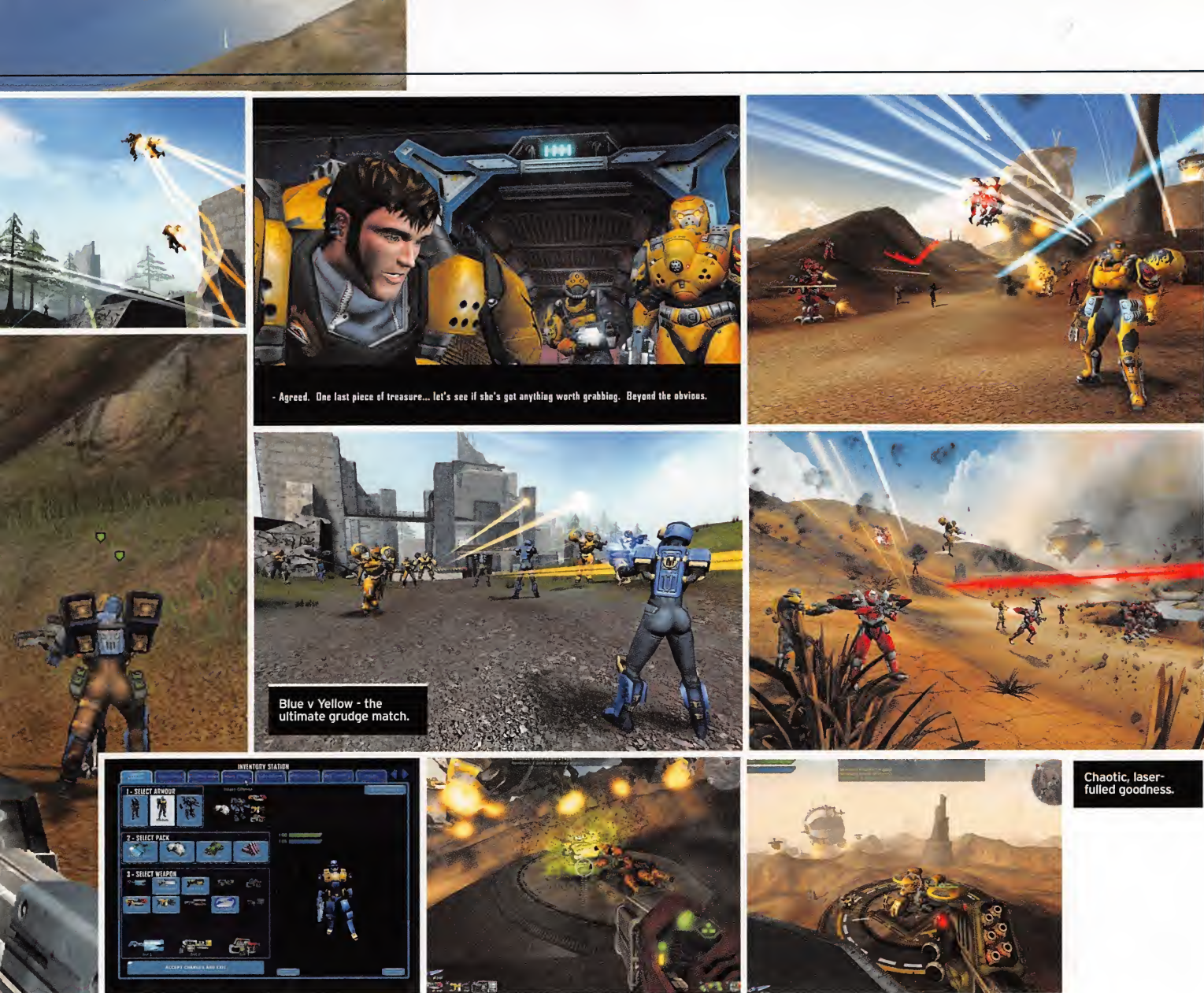
A typical Tribes deathmatch involves scooting down hills, blasting into the air, jumping and whirling in 360 degrees, trying to keep a bead on your opponent who is also constantly firing at you. Volleys of ammunition fly through space and sky. One of you will run out of jetpack fuel, becoming far less mobile. That player becomes akin to a stranded turtle on some pacific beach. He tries stoically to waddle away from his tormentors, only to find that a vicious hail of blue disc-shaped bombs rain down upon him, causing certain annihilation like some vengeful God's asteroid storm. Then he instantly spawns back at base, ready to fight again.

In fact, Tribes Vengeance revives something that's becoming rare in the first-person shooter genre: rocket launcher duels. For those who used to play a lot of Quake, Tribes: Vengeance is a perfect outlet for your old "shooting at the feet" rocket skills. Your skills of anticipation, leading the target, using objects for splash damage and firing at the feet will be revived and improve markedly while playing Tribes:

Vengeance. And you'll probably enjoy it very much.

Tribes Vengeance uses the Unreal engine and has naturally acquired some of its features. The land vehicles and hovering gunships will be instantly familiar, drawing their lineage from that game. Their speed and maneuverability are empowering. The strange part is that your targets are no longer stuck to the ground, they're dancing through the troposphere like sci-fi Fred Astaires. So, this limits your vehicular advantage somewhat. Similarly, fixed heavy weapons operate much as they do in UT 2004. One vehicle acts as a mobile spawn point and dead bodies now also come ragdolling down from orbit, as you would expect.

For a game as chaotic as Tribes, you definitely need some assistance in tracking your foes and objectives, as combat often proceeds much like an aerial dogfight. Friendly and enemy players appear in your micro-map view, along with both flags, which makes it quite easy to make sense of your surroundings. Without this feature, you'd be relying on dead reckoning and strong communication with your teammates, which isn't guaranteed on public servers, to say the least.



- Agreed. One last piece of treasure... let's see if she's got anything worth grabbing. Beyond the obvious.

Blue v Yellow - the ultimate grudge match.

Chaotic, laser-fuelled goodness.

Princess Solo

Without a good tutorial, the Tribes experience can be a confronting assault of sudden death and confusion for newbies. Here, there's a far stronger story than the Tribes series has ever provided before. The single player game has you taking the part of various high-tech Princesses, caught in a deadly organised sporting battle between the Blood Eagle and Imperial tribes, or facing capture during

button to ski, causing you to slide downhill with reduced friction. When you're coming down from a great height, you can switch to skiing down a conveniently shaped hill and really rack up some velocity. Skiing is given special attention in training, even built into one challenge where you basically need to ski in order to build up enough speed to achieve your goals.

The assumption many players will make is that single-player Tribes is a

a central depot in the centre of the map. Every player can carry a certain amount of fuel, which can then be deposited at their base. A killed player drops their fuel all over the landscape, where it can be collected. And in a devilish twist, fuel can also be stolen from your enemies' depot. Fuel creates a fantastic dynamic on top of the fast and furious Tribes experience, where every player can actively contribute to the team objective at the same time.

Despite the touchy-feely innovations, Tribes is still a hardcore game, which punishes the weak with certain death. No doubt it is accessible to far more players than ever before, but it hasn't been turned into something that would spurn the old guard. It's not a game that's easy to pick up, but offers truly dizzying heights of skill and talent to master. Paradoxically, Tribes Vengeance faces the greatest competition from the game it was built on; UT 2004.

This title has the power to spawn a new generation of Tribes. It's the most feature-laden version of Tribes ever, with the production values of a proper triple-A title. Additionally, the single-player campaign serves to strongly correct the lack of training or single player in previous Tribes games. It is an evolutionary step, but one that will prolong the series' life by a huge margin.

Ed Dawson

Online is where Tribes became famous and Vengeance doesn't disappoint here at all

an abortive spacecraft invasion. Each event shows off a small segment of Tribes gameplay, such as assaulting a player armed with a certain weapon, or small versions of the game's various objective-based modes. Subjects like jetpacking and skiing are of course well-covered.

Ski

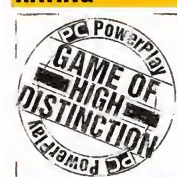
Skiing is the exploit from the original Tribes game where a player could coast down a hill in a certain way and pick up a load of speed. Irrational has carefully preserved this feature, building it into the Unreal engine so that the existing player tactics can continue. You now press a

waste of time, built only for noobs, but it has really been fully fleshed out, to the point that it is recommendable even to players who don't get into online competitive play. The story, characters and missions are cohesive enough to invite many new players into the Tribes world.

Online is where Tribes became famous and Tribes: Vengeance doesn't disappoint here in the slightest. Powered by Gamespy, it's a cinch to look up a fast game and dive straight in. It's also easy to join organised teams, presented as a simple game feature you can use.

A great new objective mode called Fuel has players trying to steal fuel from

RATING



FOR

Still a unique experience, in both solo & online play.

AGAINST

Not as accessible as other online shooters.

OVERALL

Tribes Vengeance is fast, fun, tough and ballistic. Recommended.

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Evil Genius

AS OPPOSED TO GEORGE W. BUSH WHO IS, WELL... NO GENIUS

Developer: Elixir Studios ■ Publisher: Vivendi Universal ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

800MHz CPU
128MB RAM
GeForce 2 MX 16MB
or equivalent

WANT

1.5GHz CPU
256MB RAM
128MB video card

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.mensa.org/home.php
They'll tell you if you're a genius, but as for evil intentions, well...

Elixir Studios' Demis Hassabis didn't just make Evil Genius, he IS an evil genius. This is the same man who came up with Republic: The Revolution, after all. He's a game designer who seems to have fallen victim to his own burgeoning cranium on more than one occasion, and it's evident that Evil Genius is bursting at the seams with ideas. But do all of them work seamlessly as part of a greater whole?

How Stuff Works

Evil Genius is essentially a sim game with a dash of strategy. On one hand you must build and maintain an underground lair on a remote island and on the other you must maintain a global spy network on a world map. Starting out with a fairly hefty bank balance, you begin by establishing your evil hideout by connecting a variety of rooms - a barracks for your workers, a control room to monitor your spy network, an armoury to keep prisoners and weapons, a freezer to store dead bodies, and various other more advanced rooms that become available as you complete various objectives.

Numerous pop-up videos guide you through the process, although the game does leave out some fairly critical information - such as how big certain rooms should be. Once a room is built, you then buy and place machinery and objects

within those rooms in order for them to operate. Build your barracks too small, for instance, and you'll realise you can't build enough lockers and thus attract enough workers to your island. Build your training room too small, and you can't place training equipment (that you acquire at a later date) in it in order for your workers to evolve into other unit types. This results in a fair bit of trial and error, and even a few restarted games (deleting rooms

some reason you can't delete it to cancel its production. It just makes us wonder how thoroughly some of the features in Evil Genius have been tested.

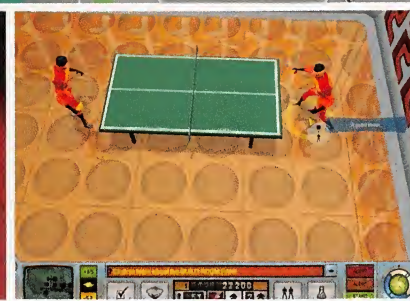
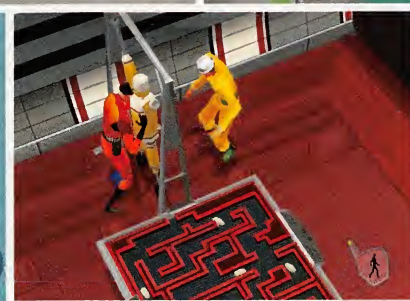
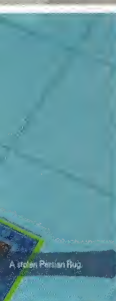
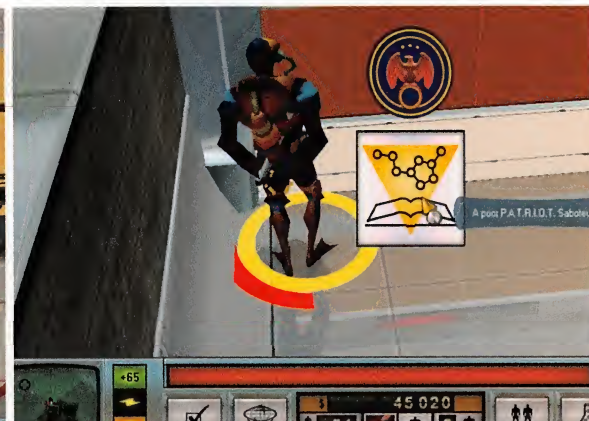
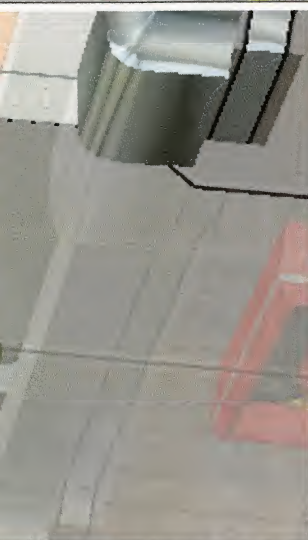
Even though there's a comprehensive in-game index of everything in the game, you're still left having to figure out certain details for yourself - even basic functionality of items you purchase. How many bunk beds do I need to build for the workers? How many memory banks need

Your workers get killed off by secret agents that seem to pop up arbitrarily on the map

doesn't refund the money you've spent) until you figure out the best way to build and manage various parts of your base.

Every critical item you need to get operating costs large sums of your evil dollars, so screw it up even slightly and you can find yourself running into horrendous debt that is very difficult to recover from. For instance, building a hotel on the surface of the island to distract tourists and secret agents is such an expensive exercise, that doing so when the buildings initially become available can screw up your entire game, and for

to be purchased for the control room? How many body bags does a freezer rack hold? Do I need to build more than one briefcase rack? Will one gun rack supply my entire workforce? There are never any answers - all you've got is guesswork. Only after playing extensively do you realise you didn't need to build something a certain size, or purchase as many items as you did, and thus you start over yet again and try to get it right and not waste as much money. Each time you restart you begin slightly more enlightened, but it would be nice if the game wasn't so



funds dry up remarkably quickly. Thus you can see that you're stuck with this problem of needing a constant supply of workers going out into the world in order to keep a constant supply of funds coming in - and simply maintaining this balance requires a little too much continual observation to make for anything other than a frustrating experience.

It's a Trap!

Much has been made of the traps that you can build in your base to stop secret agents, but in actuality they don't play as large a part in the game as we were led to believe, and they can be difficult to integrate into an efficiently functioning base. On many occasions, secret agents trigger traps only for them to kill your own workers who are passing by. In fact, your workers are so busy running around your base and moving from its interior to its exterior, that features such as security doors become almost useless. They are designed to stop intruders getting past them, but because workers are continually passing through doorways, they're almost always open and agents just walk right into your base.

Then there's the problem of babysitting your henchman. They have a habit of patrolling deep within your base where they are not needed. You're constantly having to select them and redirect them outside to take care of approaching intruders, which is always a slow and tedious process. You can't set

SAY HELLO TO MY LITTLE FRIEND

The henchmen in the game are generally quite amusing and useful. However, another example of game design possibly gone astray is the big Russian henchman (who oddly sports an Arnold Schwarzenegger accent) who defends your base with a rocketlauncher and grenades. When he uses his 'area impact' weapons, he kills nearby workers, or even worse, if he attacks anyone when inside your base, he sets the whole place on fire and destroys half of your equipment which can prove far too costly to replace. His exact usefulness failed to dawn on us. Avoid the bastard.

them to patrol specific areas, or even have them attack good guys on sight - unless you "tag" intruders with a kill or capture tag. But then even your weak minions will attempt to kill or capture intruders before your henchman can get to them, which might not be what you want them to do. You'll find that when you start getting swamped by hordes of agents, hell literally seems to break loose in your base and sometimes it can be hard to recover from it financially, especially if agents destroy your stuff.

Evil Genius is a game that was simply pumped full of too many little ideas. Some features are unnecessarily detailed and only serve to complicate matters, whilst elsewhere it seems too easy to get stumped by confusing functionality. Even so, Evil Genius is still compelling to play, if only because you become so determined to overcome its difficulty. That says something. It also has personality and charm, and of course, the whole concept is brilliant. A potential classic that could have benefited from more play testing and game balancing.

Eliot Fish

hazy on so many of its smaller details. Managing the global map can also be problematic. Sending workers into territories allows you to steal money and plot acts of infamy, however, unless you are constantly checking the world map screen, your workers get killed off by secret agents that seem to pop up arbitrarily on the map. Spend a bit of time at your base doing some construction, and return to the world map only to find half your spies getting killed by government agents because you weren't watching when they appeared in your territories. You can manually set each spy to "hide" if you do see agents on the map, but when you're working on the island screen, knowing when to do this is almost impossible. Surely this could have been better implemented, because as it stands, it's a headache.

Of course, maintaining a healthy selection of spies on the world map is what keeps the money coming in, so if you don't keep it running properly, your

RATING

PC PowerPlay
GAME OF CREDIT
PC PowerPlay

FOR
Sense of humour, good music, compelling... up to a point.

AGAINST
Quirky interface feels unintuitive, trial and error base building, many specific functions remain unexplained

OVERALL
Evil Genius could have been classic, but suffers from balancing issues.

74



Kohan II: Kings of War

FOR WHEN YOU'VE OUTGROWN WARCRAFT 3

Developer: Timegate ■ Publisher: Take 2 ■ Distributor: Take 2 ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1.5 GHz CPU
256 MB RAM
64MB DX9 AGP
Videocard
700 MB HDD

WANT

2 GHz CPU
512 MB RAM
GeForce 4+

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

<http://www.timegatestudios.com/kow/>
Get your hands on all the usual screenshots, wallpapers and related downloads.

The original Kohan's entry into the crowded RTS genre was a gutsy move for Timegate Studios. Not only did the developer stick with a 2D graphics engine when everyone else was moving to 3D but they also ditched much of what made RTS games recognisable. Rather than a focus on base building and micromanagement the game preferred to pull the point of view back considerably and focus on the overall elements of strategic battle. While it never reached the status of games like Warcraft III, the game and its expansion pack was a success in its own right, drawing the attention of many an RTS gamer starved for something new.

Three years after the first game hit store shelves and the sequel, Kohan II: Kings of War, is upon us. Set two generations after the first game, Kohan II puts you in control of one of the immortal Kohan race during a time of uneasy peace. The various factions that rule the land have begun petty squabbles and civil war seems nigh, until the re-appearance of an old foe reaffirms old allegiances and the kingdom readies for war.

Fans will no doubt flinch somewhat at the discovery that the series has now moved from the previous detailed 2D landscape to a 3D one. Rest assured this is only a cosmetic change. This is still a

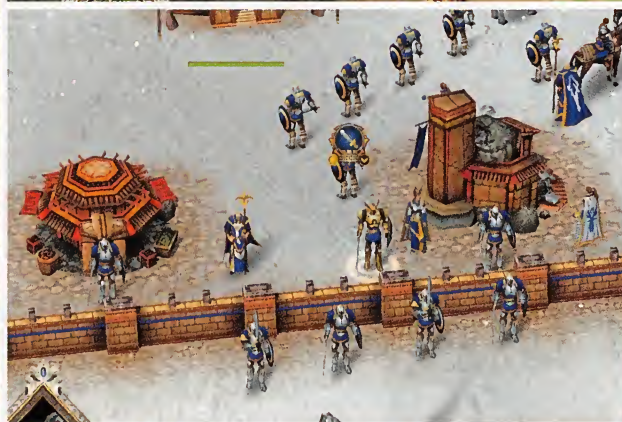
IT'S FUN TO PLAY TOGETHER

At the time of writing it was not possible to check out the multiplayer element of Kohan II since the game hadn't been released yet. However there is little reason to doubt the appeal of multiplayer in this game. Not only does the combat and resource model perfectly suit the fast paced nature of multiplayer gaming but there is great breadth of strategic style to be found within the six available races. To further diversify each army style, every race has the option of choosing a faction. Every faction comes with a number of advantage based trade offs such as increased speed for decreased combat effectiveness and others.

Kohan game through and through; the change in scenery has simply created a more enjoyable environment to play in. The world of Kohan may not be rendered with the same graphic artistry we are used to seeing in games from developers like Blizzard but it is pretty enough and the extra touches such as heard of antelope style creatures galloping through lush valleys, running from the sounds of battle make the world seem all the more alive.

If you are new to the world of Kohan your initial game time will likely be met with disappointment. While more accessible than its predecessor, Kohan II is a very different beast to many RTS games already in existence. For this reason alone it is highly recommended that you play through the tutorial levels and read your manual. If there is one element of Kohan II that is going to work against its success it is the element of re-education that is needed if you are to make progress. This is not a standard RTS.

The first aspect to Kohan that will seem foreign to many strategy fans is the unit build system. Rather than build individual units separately you build companies comprised of separate units. At first this may seem like a cheap way of making your armies seem larger than they are with each company effectively being one unit from a gameplay perspective. However, the ability to mix and match units within each company via an intuitive build menu effectively disproves this notion and allows for an incredible range of options for your army. Each company can be tailored around a specific role or made to serve a more general function. In the long run it takes the micromanagement out of unit control. If you create a company that includes a healer as support then that healer will



HIGH ON YOUR OWN SUPPLY

One of the distinguishing features of the Kohan series is the concept of supply. In Kohan, every city, ruin and outpost under your control is surrounded by a sphere of influence called your supply. Any resources within your supply automatically contribute to your funds where as anything outside of this circle is beyond your reach. This strongly encourages the establishment of forward bases to create supply around captured resource deposits. The importance of supply is increased even further when you realise that a company is able to restock lost units at no cost within supply lines. Indeed supply rapidly becomes a defining factor in victory.

carry out their function within their company without your intervention, leaving you to focus on the more important aspects of running a war.

Combat in Kohan II is extremely focused on strategy. As your units battle they will be affected by all manner of factors including their formation, the amount they have 'dug in', morale, terrain and the type of units they are fighting. Figuring out the strengths and

from the first game it is certainly one of those aspects of gameplay that needs applause for its wonderful simplicity. In Kohan II gold is the most important resource and is built up by creating a surplus in raw resources such as wood or iron ore. All buildings and companies are bought with gold but upkeep is generally paid in resources. What is great about this model is that if you do not have enough of a particular resource surplus to

More accessible than its predecessor, Kohan 2 is a very different beast to many RTS games

weaknesses of each unit type is not particularly challenging and resorts to the traditional rock, paper, scissors approach. Nonetheless the number of possible company combinations means you will rarely be in a situation where the correct counter is blindingly obvious. Kohan II will keep you on your mental toes, do not doubt that.

Special mention needs to be made of the Kohan II resource model. Inherited

pay for a unit's upkeep you can actually still keep the unit but you will be running a deficit in that resource. The true downside is seen in your cash flow which will take a bigger hit from a resource deficit than it would from simply losing some of an existing surplus. The system is extremely fluid and prevents the game from turning into a resource land grab while maintaining the strategic importance of a good resource base.

The focus on macro-strategy in Kohan II is a refreshing one and certain to please many fans of the genre. The one factor that will no doubt hurt Kohan II's success is the fact that it is such a macro focused title. After living on a diet of nothing but micromanagement in the RTS genre it can be frustrating at times to feel that your control is so general during battle. Much of the time you will feel somewhat detached from what is happening on screen and while that is very much part and parcel of the style of play Kohan II is going for, it can be frustrating.

If you can handle not having control over every single little thing and are happy to lay the smack down with broad strategic brush strokes then there is very little that would prevent a recommendation of Kohan II. Not only is it a refreshing change of pace for the genre but it is one executed with a degree of skill that is sadly uncommon.

Nathan Cocks

RATING



FOR

Deliciously deep
Intuitive interface
Excellent resource
model

AGAINST

A little hands-off at
times
Sluggish engine

OVERALL

An RTS with a
refreshing emphasis
on the Strategy

88



Conflict: Vietnam

APPARENTLY THERE WAS A WAR IN VIETNAM

Developer: Pivotal ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1GHz CPU
256Mb RAM
32Mb videocard
1.9Gb HDD

WANT

1.5GHz CPU
64Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.lyricsfreak.com/r/rolling-stones/117875.html
Paint it Black is a great song, but I'm sure Pivotal could have put the licensing fee to better use.

RATING



OVERALL

Squad-based tactics end up at odds with the setting.

61

Conflict Vietnam is supposedly a squad-based tactical shooter. I say "supposedly" because squad-based tactics are a little thin on the ground once you hit the jungle.

If you don't know where the enemies are, you are constrained to narrow jungle paths (or bunkers) and most attacks start when you stumble into a group of Vietcong. It doesn't leave much room for seeing a problem, weighing up your resources and laying down brilliant squad-based strategy.

It does give you a chance to wildly return fire while you hope that the "follow" command hasn't left the majority of your team unable to shoot for fear of hitting a friendly back.

Sure, you can move your squad up one by one, but the decent periods without action make this fairly tedious, plus any squaddie caught alone is going to be taking a dirt nap before you know it.

My favourite part of jungle warfare is when a guy I can't even see takes out my whole squad with a rocket launcher.

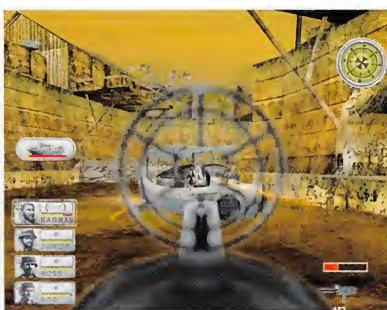
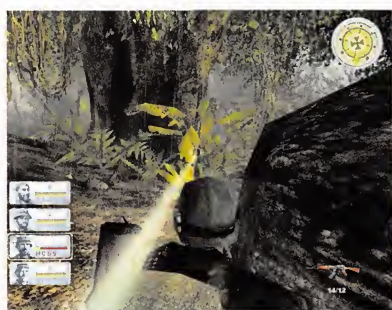
This leads to a trial-and-re-load form of scouting. Not only does this feel like cheating but it doesn't work very well since you're limited to two saves per mission. Considering missions can easily

last half an hour or more, this really tends to highlight a frustrating death.

You're probably wondering why I don't just take the time to do recon the regular way. Well, it seems that the computer has developed low-key X-ray vision because you only seem to spot the Vietcong first if they have their back to you and no one else is patrolling near by. It's not uncommon to see your computer-controlled squad mates exchange fire with VC that are totally concealed to human eyes. When you switch characters all you see is green.

Leaving a key character under AI control is a mixed blessing. They'll heal themselves, they always know which way to run when "grenade" is shouted (which isn't easy when the tiny things land behind you) and they hurl explosives at choice moments. Unfortunately their accuracy often leaves something to be desired and they don't change firing arcs very quickly which is bad considering how often guys spawn behind you in areas you're pretty sure you cleared.

The action parts of the game are pretty solid, with precise location damage and a good range of weapons but if you try to run and gun through this game like your standard FPS you will get cut to pieces



THE HORROR, THE...AH WHATEVER

It's obvious that Pivotal is going with a different feel for Conflict: Vietnam. Instead of being special forces guys inserted behind enemy lines, you get a bunch of soldiers who are cut off deep in country after their extraction chopper goes down. They aren't trying to win the war, they're just trying to get back to the nearest friendly Bob Hope show. Unfortunately it's all a bit wasted. The way your missions string together is okay, but the platoon atmosphere is totally forced. Banter and raw emotion is emulated with generic smack talk and swearing. Apocalypse Now, this ain't.

and your squad-mates still won't take a single step to protect your back even if they are only slightly out of place.

In all fairness, the squad control in Vietnam is the tightest of the Conflict games, and it would be great if you got to use it more. Even when you get some space, combat still feels dangerously unpredictable with explosives and random head-shots undoing the best plans. It might be realistic but it doesn't feel like good game design.

Maybe I'm being too harsh. There are some cool action sequences like the one where you jump between mounted weapons on a gunboat and try keep it afloat on a river of death which spice things up, and it's conceivable some people might actually dig the unpredictable chaos of encounters.

Conflict: Vietnam isn't bad, it just has problems seeing the jungle for the trees.

Timothy C. Best

Shellshock 'Nam 67

CHEAPENING TORMENT OF THE INNOCENT SINCE 2004

Developer: Guerrilla Games ■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Distributor: Eidos ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

So hands up who, when you heard there was going to be a Vietnam War game that didn't "gloss over" the nastier, grittier aspects of that ill-fated combat, really believed they weren't just going to get a big pile of tack and prostitute gags that push the already strained limits of bad taste? Anyone?

Call of Duty developer wannabe Guerrilla Games has produced a game that insults the memory of veterans from both sides of the conflict, picks the most moronic cliches from the clutch of films made about the war, and wraps it all up in an engine that fails to impress.

No, just no

As I mentioned in an Insight story back in PCPP#104, Shellshock uses real footage from the war in its opening cinematic. Real people who really got hurt by real napalm are now nothing more than background animation for us to get into a killing mood. It's frankly disgusting.

But okay, I'm going to take a deep breath and step away from the game's lack of sensitivity and look at it instead as a shooter.

Shellshock is mostly about running through a wide corridor in the jungle with a bunch of fairly intelligent AI squadmates, mowing down VC infantry who are all invariably dressed in "black pyjamas" and those straw hats you see

PURPLE HAZE

The visual style of the game is... odd. More to the point, it has no style. The opening cinematic and the menus are all fairly funky, gritty and even a little bit authentic, but the actual game engine is slick, shiny and far, far too clean. Every patch of grass looks like lawn, the jungle is laid out like the Botanic Gardens and everyone has great skin, shiny teeth and immaculately pressed uniforms. Even the guys without heads. The developer has chosen to deal with this problem by slapping a grainy faux 16mm film filter over every single thing in the game, so for the first five minutes you will be scrabbling behind your PC checking the monitor cable isn't falling out. But no. The game really does look like that.

bad Asian stereotypes wearing in unsophisticated films.

There are traps out there in the jungle, initially pointed out by arrows but later more subtle. Disarming them is a matter of clicking the mouse here and there until the tripwire or whatever is successfully disabled. Traps include spiked pits, spikes flying out from a tree-trunk, and tripwires that set off spikes.

Occasionally you will run out of the

jungle onto a rice paddy where the action opens up a bit and you are given an opportunity to flank your opponent, but for the most part the game is claustrophobic.

Next please

Your squad mates do not tolerate you running ahead, even though unlike in CoD, their assistance in beating the limited enemy AI is not really necessary.

After a successful mission, the game takes its total lack of taste up a notch by awarding the player with "chits", which can be spent on local prostitutes. Pop down to the village and select a girl you like, then the camera demurely waits outside the hut while you abuse her for a few seconds for the price of half a sack of rice. Charming.

This is not a great Vietnam War game. It's a limited shooter that tries to be Call of Duty set in the late 60s, but seems to have failed to understand the things that were good about that game. It's not the ultimate, gritty version of the Vietnam War, a mature, thoughtful gaming experience that moves beyond mere titillation in an attempt to bring some of the horror and creeping disaster of the conflict to the computer screen. It's just another shooter, glorifying blood and cheap sex.

Anthony Fordham



SYSTEM

NEED

667MHz CPU
128MB RAM
64MB video card
1GB HDD

WANT

2GHz CPU
512MB RAM
128MB video card
1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.thewildones.org/animals/partula.html
These carnivorous snails are in shock due to habitat destruction. Geddit?

RATING



OVERALL

Offensive, tacky, and not even a very good shooter

48





Richard Burns Rally

THERE'LL BE NO DICK BURNS JOKES IN THIS REVIEW

Developer: Warthog ■ Publisher: SCI ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1.6GHz Processor
256MB Ram
64MB Video Card
(Card must support
Pixel Shading)
At least 3.1GB HD
space
DirectX Compatible
Soundcard

WANT

2.6GHz CPU
1GB memory
RADEON 9800XT

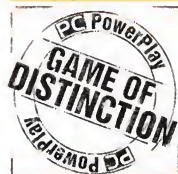
MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.richardburns.com
The name behind the
game, Richard Burns
took out the 2001 WRC.

RATING



OVERALL

Too accurate for it
to be a mainstream
hit, this is a game
for rally purists.

80

Richard Burns Rally is the greatest rally simulation ever made. Yet most gamers simply won't enjoy it. Right now you're probably thinking that Bennett has forgotten to take his lithium again, and two of his many personalities are having a bit of a mental biff. But you'd be wrong. I have taken my pill, and those two statements originate from the same, sane mind. Let me explain.

Hardcore isn't a strong enough word to describe this simulation. Until now, Colin McRae had been seen as one of the more accurate depictions of the art of bush bashing in multi-million dollar vehicles. Thanks to Richard Burns Rally it now looks like a game made for children.

Tree hugging

The first ten or so hours of Richard Burns Rally are some of the most difficult and frustrating times that any virtual racer has ever persevered with. You'll be forced to plod through the courses at speeds that make the average Tuk-Tuk look fast. If you're tempted to put your foot to the floor, the car is going to end up wrapped around a tree before you know it.

This is due to a couple of reasons. For starters, the physics and driving engine is



light years ahead of anything we've seen before. Every wheel has independent suspension and traction modeling, so you'll need to drive the cars just like the real thing. Which isn't easy. To ease you into this deep driving model a comprehensive training school is included, but even this is very difficult as you start the more complex manoeuvres.

No room to move

Once you've got a grip on how these cars handle, it's time to take it out to the track. The courses are accurate depictions of the real world courses, so there's no four-lane, gravel highways in this game.



VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE

Another feature that is bound to displease fans of arcade rally games is the lack of variety to be found in this game. There are only eight cars on offer, as well as a handful of environments. However, it'll take you long enough to master one car on one track, let alone twenty cars on dozens of different courses, so it's not a major problem.

Instead these courses are only slightly wider than your car, leaving you with very little room for error. Run off the course and it's often impossible to get back on. However, if you crash with spectators nearby, they'll give you a helping hand and lift your car back on the track. Provided you don't take them out with your fender, that is.

Unlike the silky smooth tracks on offer in other rally games, which are made up of large, flat polygons, the surfaces in RBR are true 3D replicas of the real tracks. Which means they're full of bumps, craters and gullies. This makes it much harder to keep a straight driving line, as you have to take the course at a more restrained pace. Combine these two features with a very strict damage model, and we've got the toughest rally sim on the market.

However, as with any game that requires this much dedication, the rewards are deep, and it is eventually possible to drive at hyper speed. Unfortunately it requires so much practice that most people won't have the patience to ever see what this game has to offer.

Bennett Ring



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CPL 03-85428688 cpl.net.au

DMA 08-92047015 www.dma.net.au



Chessmaster 10th Edition

WHERE LABRADOR RETRIEVERS EAT YOUR PAWNS FOR BREAKFAST

Developer: Ubisoft ■ Publisher: Ubisoft ■ Distributor: Ubisoft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

600MHz CPU
64MB RAM
16MB video card
800MB HDD

WANT

1GHz CPU
128MB RAM
32MB video card
1.6GB HDD

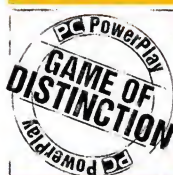
MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.chess.com
Increase your understanding of chess with CHESS MENTOR. Improve your chess game with CHESS MENTOR.

RATING



OVERALL

Fall in love with Chess all over again for the first time. Or something.

79

So the big question is this: has Ubisoft finally reached total chess saturation and hit a point where there can be nothing else to add to the world's greatest chess software? Not sure, but they must be getting close.

It must also be tempting to add more and flashier graphics to Chessmaster, since you gotta do something to keep the kids interested in a chess board just sitting there in the middle of the screen, right? Thankfully, Ubisoft has stayed its hand and CM10K has one of the leanest, meanest, subtlest interfaces seen in recent times. It runs on the Windows desktop, but manages to avoid looking all ugly and windowy.

Knight to B4

It's all about the chess, after all. Especially on a large monitor, the various windows and dialogues sit demurely off to the side and can be arranged as you see fit, to best keep your chess free flowing. There's none of that ugly, stat-heavy cluttered crap you used to have to deal with in earlier versions, although you can turn on all those windows if you want them.

There is a wide variety of chess sets on offer, including the long-awaited (by

me at least) Lewis, although Ubisoft chickened out and made the black pieces brown, instead of keeping them white and giving them only slightly different facial expressions, like in the Lewis sitting on my dining room table.

Many of the sets are locked out until you win a certain number of games in tournament mode, giving the whole experience an exciting Need for Speed Underground kind of feel. Except with chess.

Beyond tournament play, chess puzzles, reviewing famous games and getting your arse kicked by low-ranking beginner AI players, there's also an extensive instruction mode. Or perhaps exhaustive is a better word for it. Not one, but TWO chess champions take you through the basics, and even narrate some of their own famous games. The best ones to watch are the ones where the champion actually loses, since you get an insight into chess not often seen - anywhere. And how often does a computer game give you insight into anything?

Sorry, I didn't hear you B4

Actually, I spent most of my time with the game watching these narrated matches,



HISTORY OF CHESS

My lord, but Chessmaster has come a long way since Software Toolworks started the whole thing back in the mid 80s. The earliest version I could find online was Chessmaster 2000, released in 1986. Remember that old Russian Santa kind of guy looking all thoughtful over an under-lit glass chess set? Remember when that shot was some of the best graphics you could see on a PC? Remember getting caned over and over again by the computer AI? It was kind of the reverse of Warcraft 3: you'd lose again and again to the computer, then go in to school and easily trounce all your Chessmasterless friends in fools mate after fools mate. Great days.

because Josh Waitzkin - the chess expert in question - is a really engaging narrator and actually makes chess fascinating. Amazing, I know!

Chess AI engines are probably only slightly less common than tic-tac-toe AI engines, so it's to Ubisoft's credit that the Chessmaster still manages to seem just that little bit more alive and dynamic than other recent offerings, such as Kasparov Chess.

This is one of those games where just as you think you've finally exhausted its many many options, you suddenly realise there's a whole extra menu tree you haven't even looked at yet. It's massive. Yet, unlike earlier versions, it doesn't feel like an unwieldy chess encyclopaedia. It's easy to get into, pick up, then put down again for a few months. But next time you feel like a good chesing, you know exactly where to turn.

Anthony Fordham

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Etherlords 2

A NEW KIND OF SEQUEL

Developer: Nival ■ Publisher: QV Software ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

600MHz CPU
128MB RAM
16MB video card
2GB HDD

WANT

2GHz CPU
256MB RAM
64MB video card
2GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.anesthesia-nursing.com/ether.html
Ah sweet (CH3CH2)2O, where would we be without it? As HST said, devil ether. It turns you into the village idiot.

RATING



OVERALL

High quality tactical battles, more of the same... of exactly the same.

64

Etherlords 2 left me deeply confused. I was expecting a new game. The box art is different, the name is different, and it's been three years since the release of Etherlords. Yet, nothing appears to have changed. Nothing. Not the graphics, nothing. Etherlords 2 is a new kind of sequel, where the aim of the game is to figure out how it differs from the original.

Okay, I'm being a bit of a smartarse. The singleplayer campaign is in fact somewhat different from the original, in that now you only control a single hero riding an outlandish beast, instead of several. You still move around an intricately detailed game world map collecting resources, fighting random encounters, buying new spells and speaking to NPCs, but now the feel is more Diablo than HoMM. Albeit a slow, turn-based Diablo where even the simplest random encounters take five minutes to fight.

Count backwards from ten...

Like the original, EL2 is a combination turn-based item-hunt and fantasy card game battler. When you engage in combat on the game map, the view switches to a Final Fantasy style battle scene where you duel to the death with your opponent. Neither 'wizard' can directly strike the other, but must instead call upon spells, some of which manifest as fighting beasts. So follows a hit point draining game of tit for tat, spell for counter-spell and the occasional big single-shot doomsday attack.

Changes? Well, the campaign now feels like more of a story, in that you are given quests and missions to undertake, instead of just moving across a map toward some ultimate showdown. There are also occasional side quests which may give you access to additional spells or special items.

Like in the original, you will spend the first several hours of play trying to figure out how each of the spells for the four factions in the game work. Understanding that 'walls' don't attack but are key to defence is fairly straightforward, but dealing with 'pale' creatures is a little less intuitive. Why can't my goblin attack in this game? Does he have extra spells of his own? Why did a whole new line of spells suddenly appear in my control panel, only to disappear again when I tried to use them?



HELP ME!

The game does offer tutorials, but they seem to assume an understanding of terms like "tapping" that most of us would not immediately grasp. What's more, after dropping you in at too advanced a level, the tutes then leave off before any of the real high end, important stuff. Which would be fine, except that your first ever proper battle in the game will end up taking fifteen minutes to play because you will have no idea what you're doing. Yet despite this the system, once you learn it, works well and is satisfying on a strategic level. Go figure.

...and inhale deeply

Magic: The Gathering can afford to be complicated because most of the more esoteric rules are only ever used by the hardcore guys who've been playing the game for years. Etherlords has similar complexity, although Magic vets will find it too simplistic. As for the rest of us, it's a bewildering array of tiny icons floating above monster heads.

The biggest impediment to a pain-free gaming experience is the inability to see the 'deck' of your opponent before fighting them. This makes the game an exercise in quicksave, since it's almost impossible to take a good deck into a battle unless you know what cards your opponent is holding.

Finally though, is this really a sequel? The graphics are the same - and I mean exactly, using the same artwork - and the battle mode hasn't changed at all. The campaign has been revamped and works a little better, but overall this is more of an expansion than a true successor.

Anthony Fordham

Schizm 2: Chameleon

WHERE SILLY HATS SAVE THE DAY

Developer: Detalion ■ Publisher: The Adventure Company ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

Given the power of the last few generations of 3D engine, I'm surprised a game like Schizm 2 didn't come out a couple of years ago. Prettier than Myst and approaching the prettiness of Riven, Schizm 2 uses a real-time 3D engine and an FPS control method to allow the player to wander unfettered around the esoteric game world tinkering with inexplicable machines in an attempt to solve a planet-wide mystery.

Waking up in a crippled space station, Sen is confronted by an ancient hologram of one of his long dead buddies who accuses him of a terrible, planet-raping crime. Sen is condemned to spend his last few days aboard the space station pondering his fate before the station's orbit finally decays and the whole shebang plummets into the atmosphere and burns right the hell up.

I am the true pope!

Naturally, you won't be spending the whole of the game on board the space station. Solve a few puzzles, and it's down to the planet's surface, where only a single valley remains fertile. Sen's actions of two centuries ago are now catching up with him and he must

wander lonely as a cloud among strange machines and inexplicable statues with artificial intelligence, trying to figure out what the hell went wrong and if there is any way of stopping it.

Schizm 2 uses the latest iteration of the Lithtech engine, which has long been ridiculed by the online cognoscenti as being a poor pretender to the likes of Quake 3 and Unreal 2. However, in the context of a puzzler, it works very well indeed. Locations are detailed, textures have decent resolution and the various atmospheric effects such as fog and sunbeams look good. The whole game is a pleasure to walk around in, although at times it does look a little like something from 2002.

The familiar crosshair in the centre of the screen becomes an all-purpose cursor in Schizm 2, and when Sen walks near a useable object, a small arrow lights up and points to the object, kind of like a compass. This eliminates the hotspot-hunting that so plagues 2D adventures and would be to-the-cubed-power as irritating here.

Inquisition me a beat

Like Myst and Riven, the number of things to play with on screen is kept to a

ALL BOW TO THE HAT

Kudos to Detalion for realising that every possible riff on the sci-fi jumpsuit has been tried and tested and overused to the point of making us all go crazy. Instead, they've decided to pillage the style of the Commedia Dell'Arte: Sen's floppy renaissance hat hides techno wizardry and possibly some kind of life-support system. Does it freak you out? Think of the poor digital actor who actually had to wear it through all those months of development...

minimum, so the player can instead concentrate on solving the puzzles. But Schizm 2's puzzles are, sadly, not as varied as they should be. The number of times you will have to "complete a circuit" by clicking points on a grid is almost ridiculous. Like the 7th Guest, most of the puzzles are just variations on familiar old brain teasers or parlour games. Also, unlike Riven, most of the game world is locked off until you finish each puzzle in order, preventing you from being able to just wander around enjoying the scenery.

At the end of the day, the decision to use real-time 3D is Schizm 2's greatest success and also biggest problem. By relinquishing control of the player's viewpoint, the developer has had to spend more time making sure the scenery remains cohesive, limiting the amount of time available to design interesting puzzles. It's a pretty game, but like all bimbos, it lacks a little in the brains department.

SYSTEM

NEED

P3 800
128MB RAM
64MB video card
2.7GB HDD

WANT

P4 1.6GHz+
256MB RAM
128MB video card
2.7GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

Schizm.org
Oh goody, an online comic. I think there's a Mormon connection here, because the dude finds magic glasses in the first couple of pages.

RATING



OVERALL

Limited puzzles, but a detailed game world keeps interest high

73

Anthony Fordham





Sherlock Holmes: Silver Earring

Once upon a time there were no CD-ROM drives. And then, when the first single-speed drives came out for about \$400 and had caddies and other weird things, the manufacturers realised they had to bundle some kind of game that showed off the abilities of the new storage format.

A whole series of Sherlock Holmes FMV adventures were churned out, and in 1993 they were pretty damn good. Sherlock wandered around London interviewing people and it was up to the player to take notes. At the end of the chapter, the player would have to answer a quiz, to see if they really DID know who stole the Queen's tarts, or whatever.

Silver Earring works in exactly the same way, except the FMV has been replaced by a 3D third-person engine running on rendered backdrops, kind of like a mixture between Myst and Syberia. The player talks to suspects and witnesses, gathers clues, and then answers a quiz at the end of each chapter to 'solve' the mystery.

It's sedate, thoughtful, low-impact gaming that works pretty well. Play with your gran. However, it might have been nice to bring back some of that old FMV, because watching semi-animated mannequins mouthing lines about sauce on the doorknobs can get a little bit, um, uninteresting at times. **AF**

RATING



OVERALL

Straight up & down cerebral adventuring. It's Holmes-tastic!

77



Distributor: Ubisoft ■ Price: \$29.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now



Jedi Academy

Academy received praise on first release for refocusing its gameplay away from shooting and back onto Jedi powers. As the name suggests, you're a student of Luke Skywalker and you must develop your skills as a Jedi acolyte. Probably the best thing about the game is the way it takes cool elements from Episode I such as the double-ended lightsaber, and

works them into the original trilogy world of Luke, Kyle Katarn and other Jedi Knight staples. The game uses a kind of pretend branching storyline, with clumps of five missions available all at once. The variety still feels excellent, especially compared to modern shooters, and the storyline is actually worth following. **AF**

RATING



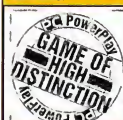
OVERALL

It's all about the force powers, baby!

84

Distributor: Activision ■ Price: \$9.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

RATING



OVERALL

Not easy, but very, very rewarding

87

Rollercoaster Tycoon 2

Rollercoasters are just for kids, right? Wrong. This is a deep and complex management sim that just happens to be set in a theme park. A working knowledge of a) management sims and b) theme parks is almost de rigueur for this game, because there's very little in the way of tutorials. What tutes there are run on automatic, leaving you watching

with no hands on the controls. However, once you've come to grips with the way the game works you'll find it enormously powerful. Most rides are heavily customisable and the coasters get increasingly huge and more complicated as your skills increase. It's a game for the hardcore, but it will dominate your waking life. **AF**



Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$19.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now



Might and Magic IX

Fans reacted with shock and horror when the venerable Might and Magic went 3D. Was this the right move on the part of the developer? Well, pretty much everyone hated Might and Magic IX, with an average review rating of 55%. They complained that the game world felt empty; that the textures were

repetitive; that it took too long to develop your character. Of course, they were all paying \$100 for the privilege. Back down here in budget-land the game takes on a different cast. A hundred hours of gaming in a vast fantasy world with plenty of characters and items to collect? Sign me up! **AF**

RATING

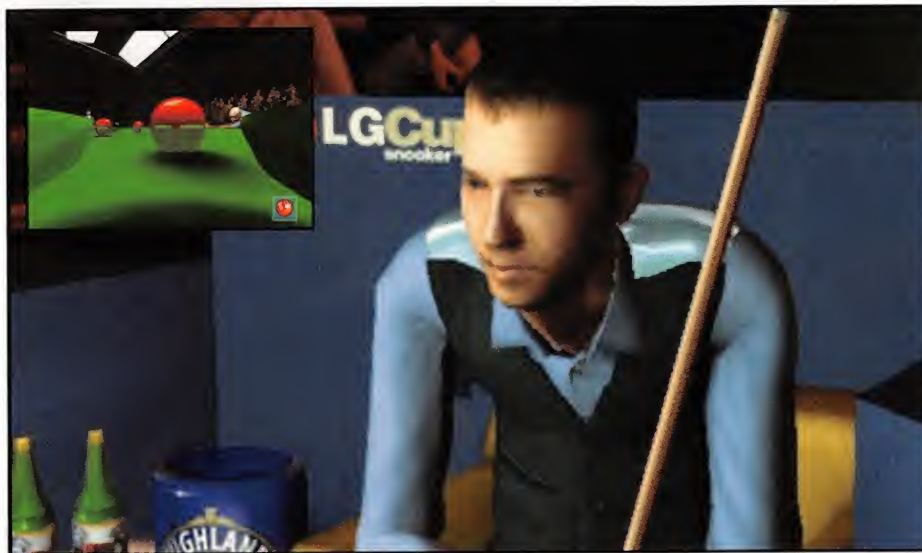


OVERALL

A memorial to a simpler age. Good, solid adventuring

69

Distributor: Ubisoft ■ Price: \$29.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now



World Championship Snooker 2004

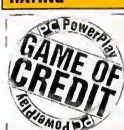
We're constantly cautioned by the editor not to write "if you like this kind of game then you'll like this game" in our reviews because that's sort of obvious. However, Officially Endorsed by World Snooker World Championship Snooker 2004 can hardly be described in any other way. Hate snooker? Walk away now. Unless you like pool, because the game does offer 8- and 9-ball pool as a sort of bonus.

Similarly, if you already own OEBWSWCS2003, you may find that there's not much new stuff in this game. This is partly to do with the fact that the famous players - Ronnie O'Sullivan, Mark Williams, Stephen Hendry and especially Steve Davis - have all been at competition level for decades.

There is an online mode, which a few people seem to be playing, to spice up your snooker experience. You can also try your hand at a selection of trick shots, which thanks to the game's able physics engine are very satisfying when they finally go off.

Just like any good chess simulator, OEBWSWCS2004 also includes historic matches and commentary. And the game does look pretty, for snooker. Shiny balls, shiny foreheads, thick baize and all sorts of purportedly authentic touches that only fans of professional snooker will be able to appreciate. **AF**

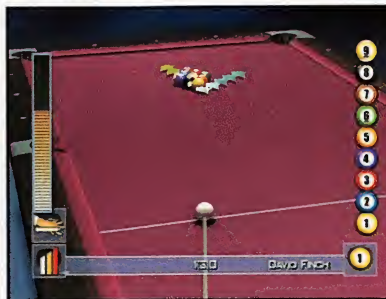
RATING



OVERALL

It's snooker. What more can we say?

65



Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

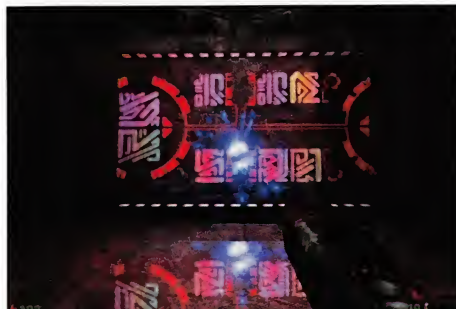
RATING



OVERALL

Greater than the sum of its parts, for Unreal virgins

70



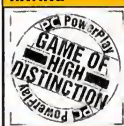
Totally Unreal

Unlike Quake 3, Unreal now looks very long in the tooth. Back in the day, its visual effects like reflecting floors and 'water' effects were revolutionary, unreal even, but now it's like playing inside a cubby house made from old cardboard packing crates painted up by the community art class. This is a chunky compilation, however. You get

the original Unreal, the decent but unremarkable Escape from Na Pali expansion, and the original Unreal Tournament, which, despite its dated graphics, is still one of the pure deathmatch greats. From "oh God, here's Unreal again" our attitude quickly flips to "wow, that's a lot of gaming for not much cash." **AF**

Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$19.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

RATING



OVERALL

One of the greats, an essential part of any collection

91

Operation Flashpoint

If you haven't played this one-time Game of the Year then, quite simply, you've missed out. So thank God for the Atari Heroes range that gives you access to this tasty and chunky package for the price of a couple of movie tickets. It's a war game of course, but a war game in which you can do

everything - be the brave infantryman, the sniper, the chopper pilot, the tank commander. The battlefield is alive and the tactics are convincing. This is a slick, sophisticated, intelligent combat sim that's easy to get into and pots of fun. And now there's no excuse not to own it. **AF**

Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$19.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now



RATING



OVERALL

Get it if you never ended up trying Team Arena

74



Quake 3 Gold

Where would PC gaming be without Quake 3? Like the Unreal pack also reviewed here, Quake 3 is feeling the harsh pinch of yesterday's news. But, for my money, the engine has stood up to the test of time and still looks pretty good on a wide range of machines. And thanks to the Interweb, there are plenty

of potential opponents still flipping endlessly between the jump pads of Q3DM17. This pack also includes the Team Arena expansion, an odd sort of title that adds all the teamplay options games like Unreal came with out of the box. Still, it does result in a very complete Quake 3 experience. **AF**

Distributor: Activision ■ Price: \$9.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

POINTS OF VIEW



A second look at the most significant releases of the past few months

Call of Duty: United Offensive

REVIEWED: #105 SCORE: 84%

Anthony's review of United Offensive was bang on the money – in singleplayer it's an intense (almost too intense) game that is a worthy addition for Call of Duty fans. Unfortunately he wasn't able to test the multiplayer mode. But given the heritage of the developer, as well as a quick look at the multiplayer maps, we had an inkling that online gamers were in for something special. Now that the game has gone retail and there are more servers than you can shake a potato masher at, we can happily pronounce that UO's multiplayer is even better than the solid offline game. UO online is a very different online game than CoD. And from the feedback of the majority of the players I've spoken to, as well as my own impressions, it's a better one. The obvious improvement is the inclusion of tanks and jeeps. The impressive firepower of the tanks is balanced by their sluggish movement, so you needn't fear that without one you'll simply become so much red slush in their treads. The maps are significantly larger than the original's, giving you plenty of room to move. But what really stands out

about these maps is how beautiful they are – it's no exaggeration to say that they're the pinnacle of online map design. Whether it's the postcard-perfect countryside of the lakeside Italy village, or the bombed out ruins of Berlin, each and every level is an astounding work of art. Two new major game modes have also been included, base assault and domination. Domination is a standard capture and hold mode, while base assault sees each team trying to destroy the other's bases. Both of these are perfect fits with the larger map scale and vehicles. Players now also gain rank over time, unlocking more privileges. At the highest rank it's possible to call in devastating artillery strikes, which can decimate teams stuck at contested chokepoints. If you're an online shooter fan, UO is a fantastic addition to your game library, and is a strong contender for best online shooter of the year. It manages to capture the same intense feel of the singleplayer game, but with the added satisfaction that the jerry you just shot was controlled by a real person.

Bennett Ring

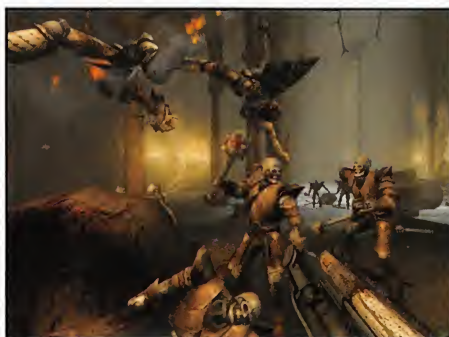


Painkiller

REVIEWED: #101 SCORE: 87%

Painkiller is a dumb game. I don't mean that as a criticism, far from it. Painkiller never tries to be clever; it never attempts to provide a gameplay experience that will redefine our notions of what gaming can be. Painkiller is about as basic as a game can get and while this may prevent it from ever reaching the lofty heights of titles like Half-Life and Thief it does mean the game is just plain, good old-fashioned, fun. Painkiller is the quick fix of the gaming world. It, rather unimaginatively, locks you in a room, gives you plenty of kick-arse weaponry and then throws hordes of beasts at you to send back to Hell. I feel somewhat cheap in saying this but there is immense appeal in blasting demonic foes away and watching their bodies whip back in exaggerated rag-doll physics motions. Painkiller is like candy, it isn't very satisfying long term but it tastes great and is err... bad for your teeth.

Nathan Cocks



Codename: Panzers

REVIEWED: #105 SCORE: 92%

Yeah, this is a fairly tight WW2 strategy game with neat detailed graphics and a few extra touches to lift it above the sea of C&C clones, but is it really the surprise hit of the year? This RTS does not have universal appeal, sadly, because it has a tight focus on micromanagement of each unit. The way experience is awarded – in a constant stream of points for every bullet a unit sends toward an opponent – makes it difficult to gauge when the unit will level up, and this adds to the generally high level of niggly focus you'll need to maintain while playing. It's just that little bit too hardcore to be mainstream, and just that little bit not hardcore enough to properly engage the strategy freaks.

Anthony Fordham

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TECH IN REVIEW

Wow, haven't things changed for NVIDIA of late? It looks like the debacle of the 5900 series of cards was a great learning experience for the company, as the 6800 series has rectified many of the woes of its prior fiasco. It's fast, it's cool, and more importantly, it's on time. This month sees another card derived from the chipset at the core of these cards in the form of the 6600GT. As you'll see from our review, NVIDIA has upped the ante in the \$400 price point, delivering performance that is quite simply unheard of for such a meagre smattering of dollars.

We also took a look at another couple of very interesting products. Logitech has outdone itself once again with the MX-1000 mouse. This laser powered pointing device offers unrivalled accuracy - in fact, it was a little too accurate for us at first, and took some getting used to. Considering Logitech controls the gaming mouse market, it's great to see that it hasn't slacked off.

Microsoft has added a cool new feature to the humble keyboard, bringing fingerprint recognition to the home. Before those of you who wear aluminium foil hats to stop the CIA reading their mind freak out, note that your fingerprint information is only stored on your PC. Well, that's what Microsoft would have us believe.

One product in particular got me all slobbery around the chops. It's BenQ's new 19" LCD screen, which has a super speedy 12ms pixel response time. This is the first monitor of this size that I've seen with such a fast response time, and the fact that it's actually



96

SFF PC Shootout

Big things in small boxes

affordable came as something of a surprise. Whether or not it'll replace my beloved Sony G520, the pinnacle of 21" CRT goodness, I have yet to decide.

It's only a few more sleeps till the fat alcoholic stalker guy will be slipping down chimneys across the world, so we're bound to see some more cool products over the next month. If you're a geek, it doesn't get much better than this time of the year...

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor
bennett@next.com.au

- 96** SFF PC shootout - Shuttle XPC SB81P, Biostar iDEQ200T, AOpen XC Cube AV, Soltek QBIC EQ3401A-V2
- 98** Logitech MX-1000 Mouse
- 98** BenQ FP937s
- 100** Hercules XPS510
- 100** Thermaltake Fanless 103
- 102** USB Sound shootout - Creative Audigy 2 NX vs Hercules Muse Pocket
- 104** Emagen Lightspeed FX PC
- 104** Microsoft Optical Desktop with Fingerprint Reader
- 106** GeForce 6600GT

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 102. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your entertainment

even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.



Mini-PC Shootout

Small form factor (SFF) PCs have come a long way from the first attempts which hit the market way back when. They tended to be crowded, dusty and underpowered affairs, guaranteed to melt anything that touched them. Today's units are sleek and powerful, offering mega-functionality with a big dollop of style, without compromising on internals. Some are geared towards portable power, while others are

still searching for a home in the living room.

In our shootout, we took a look at four of the top market units. We standardised the hardware/software specs as much as possible, with a Pentium 4 Prescott CPU, 1GB Apacer DDR333 RAM, a Seagate 160GB HDD, and nVidia graphics cards (an MSI FX5700 and an Aeolus PCX575). On the OS and driver side Windows XP

SP1 was installed, with DirectX 9.0c and 61.77 nVidia drivers. Benchmarking was an interesting experience, as each unit had slightly different CPU support specifications, so the testing platform was never going to be truly even, despite our best efforts. The results we were getting also suggested that they were being limited by the graphics cards' capabilities.

So, we ended up ignoring the benchmarks and tested primarily for features and performance – how each unit managed the heat load and how noisy they were in doing so, how many knuckles were skinned and how many cc's of blood were lost while building them. And we looked what each one was offering to make it that more attractive than the rest.

James Bannan

Shuttle XPC SB81P

• Price: \$699 • Distributor: Sato www.satotech.com.au • URL: www.shuttle.com

Built around the 915G chipset, this iteration of the Shuttle XPC range is geared towards performance, and lots of it. It's the biggest unit of all those tested, and the advantages of this quickly became apparent once we cracked the case open. Shuttle have reworked the motherboard design away from the traditional layout – the CPU/heatsink sit in the bottom left corner, under the IDE peripherals, the RAM slots are in the upper left corner (where the AGP/PCI slots normally are), which are in turn located in the upper right corner, along with the IDE/SATA controllers.

The immediate benefit is airflow and cooling. The CPU/heatsink is encased within its own enclosure, with a dedicated extraction fan pumping straight out the side as well as a smaller fan mounted directly onto the heat sink pumping air out the other side. Any heat generated by the CPU is contained and whisked away.

The 350W PSU has its own dedicated fan, and there are two smaller fans mounted above it, drawing heat away from the IDE peripherals. There's also an airflow path from any fan mounted on the graphics

card to the PSU and out. In other words, this is one cool puppy. While we were testing it, the CPU temperature stayed in the balmy mid to high 30s, with not a cloud in the sky. We expected all this cooling to make it noisier than a sports stadium, but not so. Once it was fired up, the unit purred away happily. If the lights weren't on you'd think it was turned off. The one downside is that this unit can't be tightly enclosed in an area with little ventilation, like a display cabinet, otherwise the ambient temperature rises and it will overheat regardless.

Installing the peripherals was fairly straightforward, although the drive mounting chassis was slightly bent, meaning that the CD-ROM wouldn't open without banging into the faceplate. Hopefully that's just an issue with the demo unit...

The P4 3.4 LGA chip hammered away once Windows was loaded, and the unit didn't miss a beat. It comes fully equipped with more ports than you can shake a hard drive at. It's not geared towards any particular use, in terms of gaming or media, but it's got the power to handle anything you want it to do.



PCPP Score

The SB81P is a fully-stocked, well-designed mini-beast – a very pricy but powerful experience in Matrix black.

85

Biostar IDEQ 200T

• Price: \$409 • Distributor: Westan www.westan.com.au • URL: www.biostar.com.tw

This unit was the smallest of the lot, decked out in silver with a funky mirrored faceplate. Despite the restricted internal space, there was no feeling of being cramped. Cables are neatly tucked away in rails running along the top sides of the unit, but with enough slack to attach easily to peripherals. The system is geared to house one 5.25" device and two 3.5" devices. One of those is exposed along with the 5.25" housing. These bays are accessed by manually lowering the faceplate, an activity which not only gets pretty boring after a while, but also blocks the front-mounted IR port. If you're using an IR keyboard/mouse, you may lose the connection while changing CDs.

Peripherals like the RAM and cards are nice and accessible, although the IDE device mounting can sometimes get in the way. This was the only unit where the front panel is exposed, which mars the look a bit, although it does save on internal space behind the panel. This unit was also slightly underpowered compared to the others, as the motherboard only supports Prescott CPUs up to 3.2GHz.

The cooling system is designed around horizontal airflow across the CPU through the heat sink – air is sucked in towards the back of the chassis where another fan pushes it out. It's also positioned right below the PSU, which draws excess rising air and pushes that out also. The underside of the chassis sports three indents where the CPU, Northbridge and Southbridge are located, designed to draw excess heat away into the case itself. In spite of these measures, the CPU temperature was still a little high, around the high-40s to low-50s.

Fan speed is automatically increased or reduced based on hard drive load – the more active the drive, the higher the RPMs. At full speed, this unit was pretty noisy.

Considering the slightly underpowered yet noisy nature of the Biostar, it's hard to suggest which role it would be best at. For gamers there are more powerful units out there, and for media buffs there are systems with more relevant features, all for less expense. It's a bit of everything yet not much of anything, really.



PCPP Score

Under-specced and noisy at full blast, the 200T is more of a fashion accessory than value performer.

60

AOpen XC Cube AV

• Price: \$619 • Distributor: BlueChip IT www.bluechipit.com.au • URL: asia.aopen.com.tw

The XCCube AV is a gorgeous-looking device. It was also the most underpowered unit we tested. Its EA65 motherboard only supports Prescott CPUs up to 2.8GHz/533 FSB. At the time of writing, the EA65-II motherboards (which support Prescott up to 3.4 GHz/800 FSB) were not yet in the country, but will be by the time of publication.

This was the only true media centre unit out of the four. It comes with an "InstantOn" mini-OS, which resides on its own partition on the hard drive, and which has to be installed before the normal OS. It's used for the non-PC modes which the unit supports - CD/MP3 player, FM tuner, TV unit or DVD/VCD player. The machine fires up and the cut-down OS loads the option you selected. The XCCube also features a Philips TV tuner and remote control, as well as a Windows home theatre software bundle, so it's ready to make itself at home in your living room. The only incident we had with the software was that the driver CD wants to install every single driver at once. Not a good

idea. We tried it to see how it would handle the process, and ended up reinstalling Windows.

Only marginally larger than the Biostar unit, the XCCube is seriously compact. It's only designed to house one 5.25" device and one 3.5", so the DVD-ROM/HDD combo is looking really good. However, the cabling is nice and neat and the internal space is maximised. It was easy to assemble, without incurring wounds that required hospitalisation.

Cooling is minimal, with only two system fans - CPU and PSU. However, as the machine is under-specced (by comparison) and it holds only two devices, heat isn't really a problem. It runs a bit hotter than the Shuttle, but not by much. As a result, it's whisper-quiet, which is exactly what you want from a media machine.

The XCCube is perfectly specced for the world of everyday lifestyle computing with card readers and front and back ports galore. It would fit in with your other AV equipment without a hitch, and would look great doing so.



PCPP Score

As the Shuttle XPC is the performance beast, the XCCube is the media-lover's fantasy box.

80

Soltek QBIC EQ3401A-V2

• Price: \$380 • Distributor: Altech www.altech.com.au • URL: www.soltek.com.tw

This was the second biggest unit we tested. The Soltek aims to maintain a balance between size and carrying capacity - it's advertised as being able to mount two 5.25" IDE devices as well as two 3.5" devices. We didn't install that many devices, but quickly discovered that you really wouldn't want to. Internal space is cramped, and the cabling hasn't been thought through very well. With only three devices (DVD-RW/FDD/HDD), the cables were a complete mess, blocking access to the RAM and CPU, and they were also extremely difficult to install, with as much contorting as any game of nude Twister, but it wasn't as much fun.

One surprising aspect of this unit is that it was the only one not to come with its own CPU heatsink. All the other units had their own cooling systems, and a proprietary heatsink was part of the overall design. These apparent oversights made us wonder how much thought really went into system cooling, which is supposed to be based on Soltek's "IcyQ" system. There is a large extraction fan on the right side of the case near the CPU, removing

air through the rear, as well as the PSU fan, but it seems too reliant on whichever heatsink the user happens to have. Keeping all this in mind, it was no surprise that the system ran at a consistently high temperature - with the CPU around the low to mid 50s. It didn't overheat during testing, but we got the feeling that it wouldn't take much to push it over the edge. In spite of this, the noise level was remarkably low, even with the fans going at full pelt.

These issues aside, the Qbic is a sleek-looking system that ran well, and gave us no headaches with the OS or drivers. It supports the Prescott CPU at 3.4GHz, and pumped through the benchmarks without a hitch. Similar to the Shuttle XPC, it doesn't try to be any one particular thing - it has enough features to do just about anything. The one thing it doesn't have is card-reading facilities, which makes its immediate use as a media box questionable, as other systems come with card readers as standard. It would make a good, nicely priced gaming box, however, or an expensive drinks rest.



PCPP Score

Cramped but powerful, this unit is for those who love brushed aluminium.

70

Logitech MX-1000

• Price: \$159.95 • Distributor: Logitech www.logitech.com • URL: www.logitech.com

Logitech has become a lot like Creative. No, it's not making the bits of silicon that damage your eardrums and cause your neighbours to put a hit on you. It's similar because it has managed to stitch up a particular segment of the component market. If you want a gaming mouse, Logitech is the only answer. Until now the MX-510 has been the ruler of the roost, but Logitech has planned to usurp its own champion with the new MX-1000.

The MX-1000 looks quite similar to the MX-700, using a wireless transmitter which updates as quickly as a USB connection, making it suitable for hardcore gamers. It's got more buttons than a, erm, button shop, and has been refined to fit your hand even more than its comfy predecessors. The scroll wheel takes a note out of Microsoft's book and now tilts sideways as

well as rolling back and forth, with a nice solid feel to it. There's nothing worse than your mouse's batteries crapping out on you halfway through a clan match, so the inclusion of a spiffy battery meter is a welcome introduction.

But what really makes this mouse different is that it's not an optical mouse. It's a laser mouse! Before you go and buy your local PC store's entire shipment to attach to the heads of your well trained sharks, it might help to know that this laser is totally safe to use in the home environment. There'll be no laser battles with these mice kiddies. According to Logitech, this laser element is twenty times as accurate as an optical mouse, so we thought we'd

SPECIFICATIONS

- MX Laser Engine
- Recharging base station
- RF cordless
- 4-level battery indicator

PCPP Score

Takes a little getting used to, but is the new benchmark for mouse accuracy.

90



give it a shot in our new favourite shooter, CoD: United Offensive.

Coming from the MX-510, this mouse is certainly a change. It's significantly heavier, and feels much "stiffer". You need to use a little more effort to move the crosshairs. However, after a couple of hours we soon got used to it, and noticed that it is indeed more accurate than even the MX-510. It's also more accurate on

rougher surfaces, but still can't handle clear glass.

If you already own an MX-510, it's probably not worth upgrading to the MX-1000, as it's not a huge leap. However, if you're stuck with an old Microsoft ball mouse and have a spare \$160 to blow on the best mouse on the market, the MX-1000 is a worthy interface between you and your PC.

Bennett Ring

BenQ FP937s

• Price: \$1099 • Distributor: www.benq.com.au • URL: www.benq.com.au

We all know that LCD screens are the way of the future. Yet many gamers still prefer the tried and trusted CRT behemoth that is currently causing their cheap desk to warp and buckle. There are three main reasons that the CRT still wins out for many gamers, but after seeing the FP937s we're not so sure if these qualms are quite as relevant as they used to be.

The first of these is the pixel response time, which leads to motion blur in fast paced games. As we all know, the advent of monitors with 12ms pixel response times has pretty much solved this problem for all but the most eagle eyed gamer. The FP937s just happens to be a 12ms monitor, and after spending a few hours of playing the high speed UT2K4, we can vouch for the fact that motion blur is unnoticeable.

Another disadvantage of LCDs is the size versus price ratio. Unless you've been adopted by Daddy Warbucks, 17" is about as big as the average gamer can

afford. While this still has the same viewable area as a 19" CRT, it's still not up there with the 21" babies many gamers prefer. Well, a 19" LCD is now affordable thanks to the FP937s. All 19" of its 12ms glory will set you back a meager \$1099. Doesn't sound too cheap at first, but a quick scan of our favourite store searching website (www.staticice.com.au) returned a range of prices much lower than this RRP. In fact, some stores were selling the monitor for a lowly \$829, and at this price it's an absolute bargain. Bear in mind that this monitor has the same viewable area as a 21" CRT, and this is the first 12ms monitor of this size we've seen.

We ran our DisplayMate tests, and found that the only weakness was a little bit of washing out of the lighter shades against a white background. The colour

SPECIFICATIONS

- 1280 x 1024 native resolution
- 12ms pixel response time
- 500:1 contrast ratio

PCPP Score

Big, fast and finally affordable.

90



uniformity was also a little off, with slightly darker shades in the corners and around the edge of the screen, but it wasn't so bad that you'd notice it in daily use.

Compared to the slim lines of the 172x, this flat screen is definitely a chunkier creation. But when you stand it next to a 21" CRT, the difference in size is incredible. Not to mention the difference in weight - even the

most exercised-deprived gamer will be able to lug the FP937S around without too much trouble.

If you've been holding off on LCDs until affordable 12ms units started to arrive in a size that does today's games justice, and didn't want to have to mortgage your sister to pay for it, the FP937s could be just what you were waiting for.

Bennett Ring

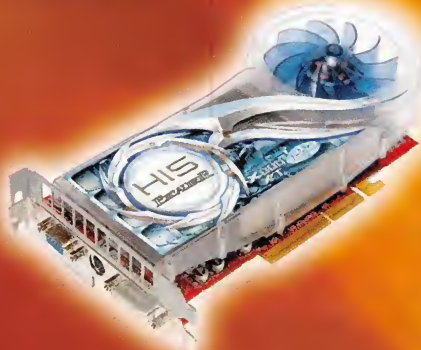
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Hercules XPS510

• Price: \$99 • Distributor: TechPac www.techpac.com.au • URL: www.hercules.com

As the proud owner of a set of the older Hercules XPS510 5.1 speaker set, I was very keen to check out the latest version of these value-packed boom boxes. The last version set new standards for sound quality in the budget bracket, so you'd expect the new set to at least equal this, right? Unfortunately not, as our bass-deprived ears can testify.

As soon as I saw the box for these speakers, I knew something was amiss. It was less than half the size, not to mention half the weight, of the older series. As any audiophile can tell you, weight is one of the first indicators of speaker performance. Sure, it's not the most scientific of measurements, but if a subwoofer weighs half as much as your body weight, chances are it's going to be floorboard rumbler.

PCPP Score

Cheap, but very nasty.

50

SPECIFICATIONS

- 10 Watts RMS subwoofer
- 5x3.5 Watts RMS satellites

Setting this 5.1 set of speakers up couldn't be simpler, thanks to the colour coded plugs for each satellite. It wasn't all rosy though, as the input for the centre/sub channel was very temperamental, requiring much plugging and unplugging before the subwoofer started to work. There are even two sets of inputs, one for stereo, the other for 5.1, just in case you're still stuck in the depressing land of stereo sound.

It didn't take long to figure out that the sound quality of these speakers doesn't come close to the older version. The subwoofer is a pitiful little box that barely has the power to scare a gnat, let alone do the shotgun in Doom III



justice. The satellites aren't much better, being very tinny, but at least they don't hiss.

While the new version is around \$60 cheaper than the old, the degradation in sound quality simply isn't worth the price

saving. If you're looking for a decent set of budget speakers start looking for the older version before they dry up, but avoid these like the plague.

Bennett Ring

Thermaltake Fanless 103

• Price: \$79 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au • URL: www.thermaltake.com.au

There's nothing more annoying than getting immersed into your latest game, only to have your CPU heatsink's fan kick into overdrive, pulling you back into the real world with the shrill intensity of a dentist's drill. As CPUs continue to rise in frequency, heat is becoming more of an issue, and the need for faster fans on our CPU heatsinks has become a necessity. Thermaltake reckon they've got the answer to the dreaded problem of fan noise with its Fanless 103 heatsink.

This bulky unit uses six heatpipes to move heat from the copper base plate up to the aluminium fins on top. To fit it you'll need to remove your standard HSF mounting bracket and replace it with the included bracket, which is compatible with both Pentium 4 and Athlon 64 sockets. It's then simply a matter of attaching the heatsink with the finger-friendly clip.

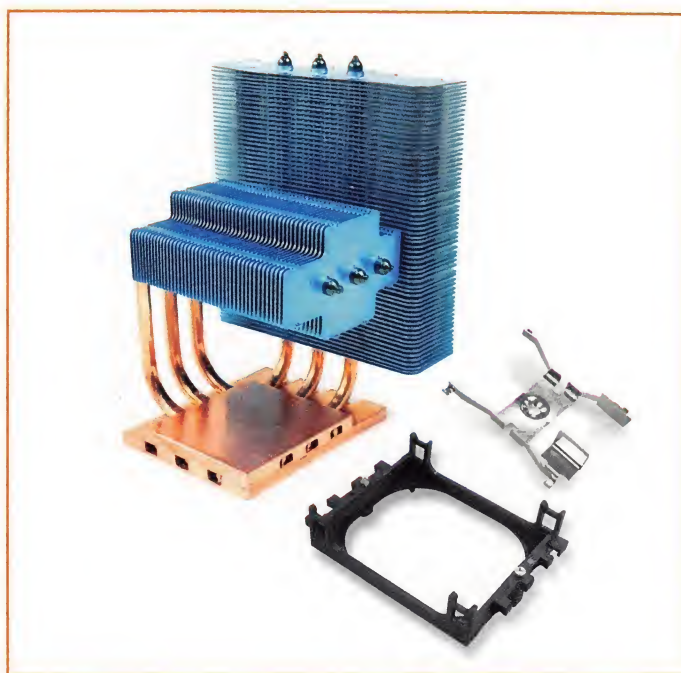
I installed this cooler onto an Athlon 64 3400+ inside a roomy Lian Li server tower. Being the overconfident tweaker that I am, I

decided to leave all case fans disabled, and was amazed at how my piercingly loud PC was now as quiet as a mouse. A dead one at that. Motherboard Monitor 5 was installed to keep an eye on the temperature, and while it started off nice and low it soon started to soar. A loop of 3DMark 03 put a bit of pressure on the CPU, and before I knew it the CPU temperature had hit 77C, with the machine crashing soon after.

Let's try that again with a small 60mm case fan blowing air directly onto the heatsink, shall we? Sure, it wasn't quite silent, at around the same noise level as the stock heatsink in low speed mode, but it was a damn sight better than the buzz box of a heatsink that the Athlon 64 ships with when under load. And now it remained stable, even after an extended bash of CS: Source. The load temperature had risen, up to 71C from 65C, but my PC was a

SPECIFICATIONS

- 752 grams
- 105 x 95 x 138mm
- P4, Athlon 64 and Athlon 64 FX compatible



much quieter beast. Idle temps were also respectable, up slightly to 52C from the original 49C. However, the story doesn't end there. This HSF proved to be very susceptible to ambient temperature; as soon as the room heater was turned on, the CPU temp soared again to 74C, right on the crash threshold.

While you'll still need a case fan blowing over this heatsink, these are usually significantly less deafening than the stock heatsink, especially under load. You'll also need to ensure that your room temperature is relatively cool, but it's still a damn sight better than the stock heatsink.

Bennett Ring

PCPP Score

Doesn't deliver totally silent performance, but is a major improvement over the stock heatsink - provided it doesn't overheat.

78



Combo Cool DIY

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UFO#3		UFO#3 + Hammer525		UFO#3 + TOWER102	UFO#3 + TOWER112
XBPRO#1	XBPRO#1 + GOLF325			XBPRO#1 + TOWER102	XBPRO#1 + TOWER112
XBPRO#2			XBPRO#2 + PIPE101	XBPRO#2 + TOWER102	
XBPRO#3	XBPRO#3 + GOLF325		XBPRO#3 + PIPE101	XBPRO#3 + TOWER102	XBPRO#3 + TOWER112
Silent Cat 8CM		Silent Cat 8CM + Hammer525		Silent Cat 8CM + TOWER102	Silent Cat 8CM + TOWER112
Silent Cat 9CM	Silent Cat 9CM + GOLF325		Silent Cat 9CM + PIPE101		Silent Cat 9CM + TOWER112
Street Fighter	Street Fighter + GOLF325		Street Fighter + PIPE101	Street Fighter + TOWER102	Street Fighter + TOWER112

* Technical specifications available from www.thermaltake.com.au
 * Fans can also be used as a case fan for total system cooling



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USB Sound Shootout

Leave that screwdriver in the drawer, there's no need to crack open your case for excellent sound. ANTHONY FORDHAM takes a look at two USB sound solutions, and is pleasantly surprised.

Creative Audigy 2 NX

• Price: \$199 • Distributor: Creative au.creative.com • URL: www.soundblaster.com/products/audigy2NX

You might think that going USB over an internal PCI card with breakout box would mean sacrificing a hell of a lot of power and functionality. Not so.

The guts of the Audigy 2 NX have very similar features to the high-end Audigy 2 ZS, and most of the sacrifices are a result of the form factor.

This is a small device. Smaller than the average paperback novel, it can slip easily into your notebook bag or that awkward gap between your monitor and the wall. This is of course Creative's main selling point - the NX is all about portability and simplicity. Pull it out, plug it in, away you go.

Some stats then: inside we have the same 24-bit, 96kHz ADC and DAC converters as the higher end card, the same 7.1 surround output, a slightly inferior (but still impressive) 102dB signal-to-noise ratio and 24-bit recording.

The box has ports for front, rear, centre and sub-woofer speakers, although if you want to take advantage of 7.1 you'll need a set of speakers with an optical in. Also, 24-bit multi-channel playback and simultaneous playback and recording only work with USB2.0, even though the unit works well on a USB1.1 connection.

Sounds great so far, right? Now it's time for the caveat. The NX is targeted at the struggling notebook user or the 'mom-and-pop' desktop,



85

while the gamer is expected to buy the ZS. Creative cards are all about EAX in games, and in an internal card the EAX calculations are performed by the card. With the NX, EAX is emulated by your CPU, which means a performance hit. We're talking 18% CPU usage compared to 14% usage on an internal card, which

is going to have an impact on framerates. If you run on USB1.1, the hit is even worse.

Of course, if you're running a fat machine in a cramped space, don't want to put in a PCI card or are indeed using a notebook, the performance hit is going to be outweighed by the convenience of this device.

Hercules Muse Pocket

• Price: \$99 • Distributor: Tech Pacific www.techpac.com • URL: europe.hercules.com

Hercules has taken a slightly different tack with its external sound device. While Creative has jammed as many ports, knobs and buttons onto the tiny plastic Audigy 2 NX as it can fit, the Muse Pocket is a much leaner device by far.

Looking like nothing less than a giant capstan from an old reel-to-reel tape deck, the Muse is certainly funky. Aluminium with a satin finish, the unit consists of a solid, heavy base with speaker ports in it, with a large similarly heavy volume knob on top. The idea is that controlling volume and mute is 'easy' because you just spin the knob to change the volume, and push down on it to mute or unmute.

In practice, this idea doesn't really work. For a start, who changes their volume using their sound card? Why not just use the desktop, the volume controls built in to most keyboards, or the speaker controls? Also, the knob is just a big piece of aluminium stuck to a variable resistor built into the base of the unit. The knob doesn't actually fit too well, and on our slightly used review unit, spinning the knob didn't turn the resistor underneath, because the knob was far too loose. Similarly, the mute control isn't very responsive - click it twice in quick succession and nothing at all happens. This is because it doesn't control the hardware, it communicates



75

with Windows via the USB cable to control Windows' own desktop volume control.

As for power, the Muse supports 5.1 sound, has a maximum recording resolution of 48kHz and works with USB1.1 as well as USB2.0.

It's certainly an improvement over onboard sound, but it is a weighty little chunk of love,

and the USB cable can't be detached for neat storage. Also, since it doesn't take advantage of high-speed USB2.0, it will cramp your PCs gaming style, framerate-wise.

It is cheap though, and has a certain aesthetic appeal which will go well with the current market obsession with aluminium cases.

OUR OPINION IS:

This one is a bit of a no-brainer. For a \$100 premium, the Audigy 2 NX is a "proper" sound solution with a wide range of features, 7.1 support and a generous software bundle. While the Muse is cheap at \$99, its limited software, design quibbles and lack of features make it suitable only for the cash-strapped or the aluminium-obsessed. But both cards come with the USB caveat - they will affect framerates in your games. However, in reality the impact is minimal - only a few percent - so the convenience of an external solution may outweigh any performance hit.

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August 2004



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Cat 10129-16 \$89



Front Access Bay

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Cat 6765-16 \$129



Two Port KVM with Sound

Allows one keyboard, monitor, and mouse to control two PCs. Includes 1.2m cables.
Cat 11669-16 \$139



SATA HD Rack

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Cat 6787-16 \$139



USB 2.0 TV Box

Watch TV on your laptop or PC
Cat 3527-16 \$189



12.1" LCD Monitor

This tiny LCD screen is great for space critical situations.
Cat 4658-16 \$969



IDE RAID Controller

Attach up to four IDE drives in RAID
Cat 2886-16 \$99



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This great capture card comes with a front access bay for easy access. Captures analogue and digital signals.
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This PCI card supports both FireWire A and B with speeds up to 800Mbps
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Thermaltake Silent Boost

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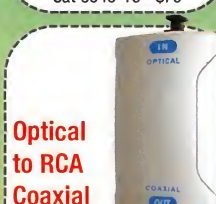
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Emagen Lightspeed FX

• Price: \$5,999 • Distributor: Emagen www.emagen.com.au • URL: www.emagen.com.au

We heartily recommend building your own PC, but some people either can't be bothered or simply aren't confident enough to put together a device worth a few thousand dollars. Then there are those who commute in their private Learjet, give their kids a jet ski for getting an A and wipe their butt with greenbacks. This last group are probably the ones most interested in the Lightspeed FX. It's one of the most expensive pre-built PCs around, but you get what you pay for.

An Athlon FX-53 lies at the heart of this system, paired up with a GeForce 6800 Ultra and a gigabyte of DDR400 memory. That alone guarantees blazingly fast performance, but the addition of a RAID 0 setup powered by a pair of WD Raptors is the icing on this ninja-fast cake.

The machine has been well constructed, with a very tidy interior. A clean install of Windows was present, lacking the usual bloatware associated with pre-built

SPECIFICATIONS

- AMD Athlon FX-53, 1GB Corsair TWINX-3200XL DDR SDRAM
- Asus ABV Deluxe Motherboard
- Asus 256MB GeForce 6800 Ultra
- Samsung 172X Monito
- 2x Western Digital Raptor 74GB 10000rpm HDD
- 1x Western Digital 200GB 7200rpm HDD
- Pioneer 16X DVD+/-RW Dual Layer Burner
- Soundblaster Audigy2 ZS
- Logitech Z-5300THX 5.1 Speakers
- Logitech MX Duo
- Microsoft Windows XP Professional
- 1 Year Onsite Warranty

machines, but we did notice that the version of DirectX was quite old. No biggie, but when you're spending this much you want everything to be perfect.

As you'd expect, this machine is fast. Blazingly, eye-wateringly fast. Every benchmark we threw at it was torn to shreds by the powerful

PCPP Score

It doesn't get much speedier than this, nor more expensive.

90



hardware within. Yet we've still got one small niggling issue - we'd rather go with the X800XT Platinum Edition than the 6800 Ultra.

Thankfully Emagen are happy to install this if it's your preference.

When you buy a machine this fast, value really isn't something to be too concerned about. After doing a quick price check, we found that the components alone are valued at

over \$5,400, so the end price of \$5,999 isn't too bad, especially considering it ships with a one year warranty.

If you've got a large wad of cash burning a hole in your pocket, and would rather get somebody else to do all the hard yards for you, the Emagen Lightspeed FX is a worthy candidate for your cash.

Bennett Ring

Microsoft Optical Desktop with Fingerprint Reader

• Price: \$199.95 • Distributor: Microsoft www.microsoft.com.au • URL: www.microsoft.com.au

Who hasn't wanted to login to their computer by placing their face against a wall mounted scanner, as a red laser beam glides back and forth performing a retina scan. Well, sorry but that kind of tech still isn't common outside of Area-51, but the next best thing is here - a fingerprint scanner built into a keyboard.

For all intents and purposes it looks like your standard keyboard. As such it's festooned with a million and one different shortcut keys, just begging to save you the arduous task of having to *gasp* click the mouse button twice. Full media player controls, IE favourite keys, as well as shortcuts for the more common apps such as calculator, mail, web browsing and Messenger are present. It's got a nice feel to it as well, with firm yet responsive keys. It also ships with a wireless mouse, which is nice and comfy and has one of those cool wobbly scroll wheels that can tilt from

SPECIFICATIONS

- It's a keyboard and optical mouse. With a fingerprint scanner. 'Nuff said.

side to side. It's even decent for gaming. Unfortunately the keyboard is wired, but it's for a very good reason...

Take a glance to the left side of the keyboard and you'll see a little glowing red window. This is the fingerprint scanner - hence the wired keyboard to take care of the additional data flow. Training it to recognise your fingers only takes a matter of seconds, and it seems quite accurate. It certainly never allowed a different finger to be accepted as an authorised one during our testing.

So what good is a fingerprint scanner to the average PC user? Well, apart from fooling visitors into thinking that you're actually a sleeper agent for the NSA, it's great for remembering usernames and password. When you visit a



webpage and have to log in, the keyboard software allows you to instead assign a fingerprint to it. Logging in is now as simple as placing your finger on the pad - no more confusing usernames and passwords to remember. However, Microsoft doesn't recommend using it for anything that requires seriously high amounts of security. Multiple users and their

fingerprints can be recognized by one PC, so it can be used by more than one person, which is its most probable use.

Considering how handy this keyboard can be, the asking price is quite reasonable. Kudos to Microsoft for turning this cool technology into something that's genuinely usable in the home.

Bennett Ring

PCPP Score

Great for remembering all of those pesky usernames and passwords that so many websites now require.

88



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GeForce 6600GT

• Price: approximately \$399 • Distributor: n/a • URL: www.nvidia.com



Whether or not we need it yet, PCI Express is getting a healthy push out the door courtesy of the graphics chipset manufacturers. Take the new GeForce 6600GT as an example; the PCI Express variant is going to be out months before the AGP version. In fact, by the time you read this it should already been on store shelves, while ATI's rival X700 chipset still languishes in the land of sometime-soon. If there's one thing NVIDIA has been doing well of late, it's executing on time, beating ATI to the punch when it comes to getting new chipsets out to the market. And it looks like NVIDIA has done it again with the 6600GT, NVIDIA's new solution to the middle-range price bracket.

This card is based around the NV43 core, which itself uses much of the NV40 technology, the chip at the heart of the 6800 series. As a result, this 11 micron part shares a lot in common with its bigger brothers. Full support for Shader Model 3.0 is included, but whether or not it's a worthwhile feature is still up for debate. The NV43 core isn't quite as beefy as the NV40, with a number of features being whittled down. Instead of 16 pixel pipelines, NV43 has eight, which is still a significant number for a card at this price point. A 128-bit memory bus services the 500MHz DDR3 memory, which runs effectively at 1GHz. The core is also clocked at 500MHz. It's also ready to be hooked up with another 6600GT courtesy of NVIDIA's SLI mode.

The closest competition from ATI right now is the X600XT, which looks like a puny, underweight albino compared to

the body-building, athletic 6600GT. The X600XT has only as half as many pixel pipelines, with a total of four, and its memory is significantly slower, running at 365MHz (730MHz effective). As a result, we were expecting the 6600GT to beat the living daylights out of its rival, before doing a merry little dance on its shallow grave. As our test results show, our expectations proved to be true.

To test the 6600GT we used the PCI Express system from last month's PCI Express PowerTest. This is comprised of a Pentium 4 3.4GHz, 1GB of 533MHz DDR2 and an Audigy 2 soundcard, all running on an Intel 925 motherboard. A fresh install of Windows XP Pro with service pack 1 was used, but we had to change the drivers used. Last month's roundup saw us using the 61.77 detonators, but these refused to detect the 6600GT. We had to use the WHQL-candidate 65.76 drivers as a result.

The first test off the benchmarking rack was the gorgeous FarCry test. As you can see from the results, the 6600GT absolutely wiped the floor with the X600XT, scoring around twice as fast in every resolution. Considering the 6600GT is likely to only cost around \$50 more than the X600XT, these results are nothing short of remarkable.

UT2K4 was next up, and once again the 6600GT had a decisive lead over ATI's card. At the lower resolution of 1024 x 768 the lead wasn't so great, but once the test hit 1600 x 1200 the 6600GT left the ATI chewing on its dust, at over twice the performance. The Aquamark 3 results showed an



identical trend, with the 6600GT performing around twice as quickly at the higher resolution. We usually use Call of Duty, but due a quirk we've been having for quite some time with NVIDIA cards (we're unable to disable vsync) so every benchmark result was tied to 60 frames per second. Usually the brute force approach of using PowerStrip is enough to remedy the problem, but this time around it didn't work. Our final benchmark looked at UT2K4 running with 4X anti-aliasing and 8X anisotropic filtering. Once again the 6600GT left the X600XT for dead, at over

twice the performance at high resolution.

NVIDIA has absolutely nailed this price point with the 6600GT. How long they can remain in this dominating position is unknown though, as ATI's X700 isn't far off. However, until that time comes, the 6600GT is the only sensible option if you're looking for a mid-ranged PCI Express video card.

Bennett Ring

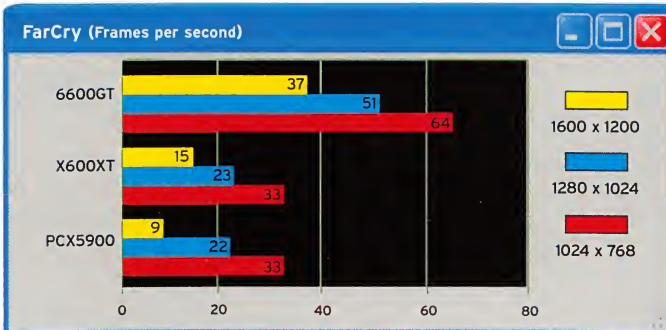
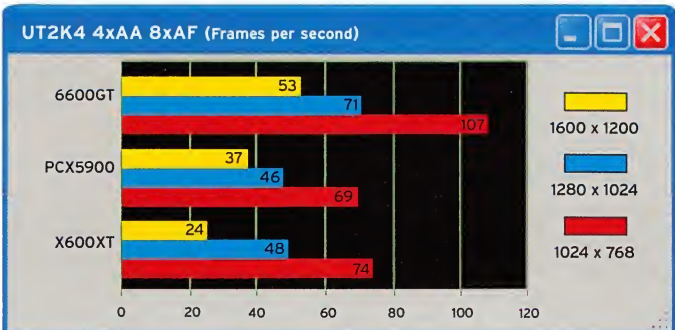
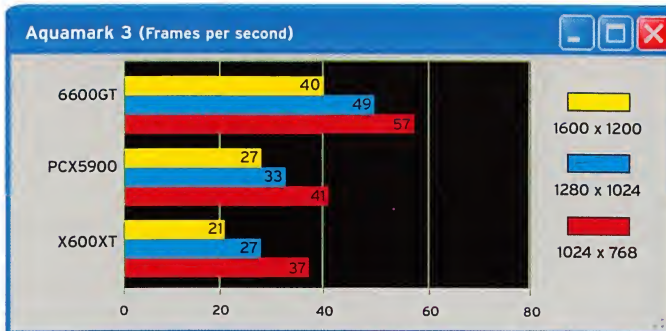
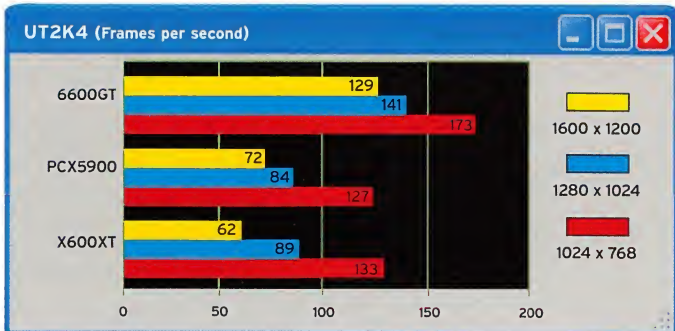
SPECIFICATIONS

- NV43 core at 500MHz
- 128MB of GDDR3 memory at 500MHz
- DirectX 9.0 support
- SLI-ready

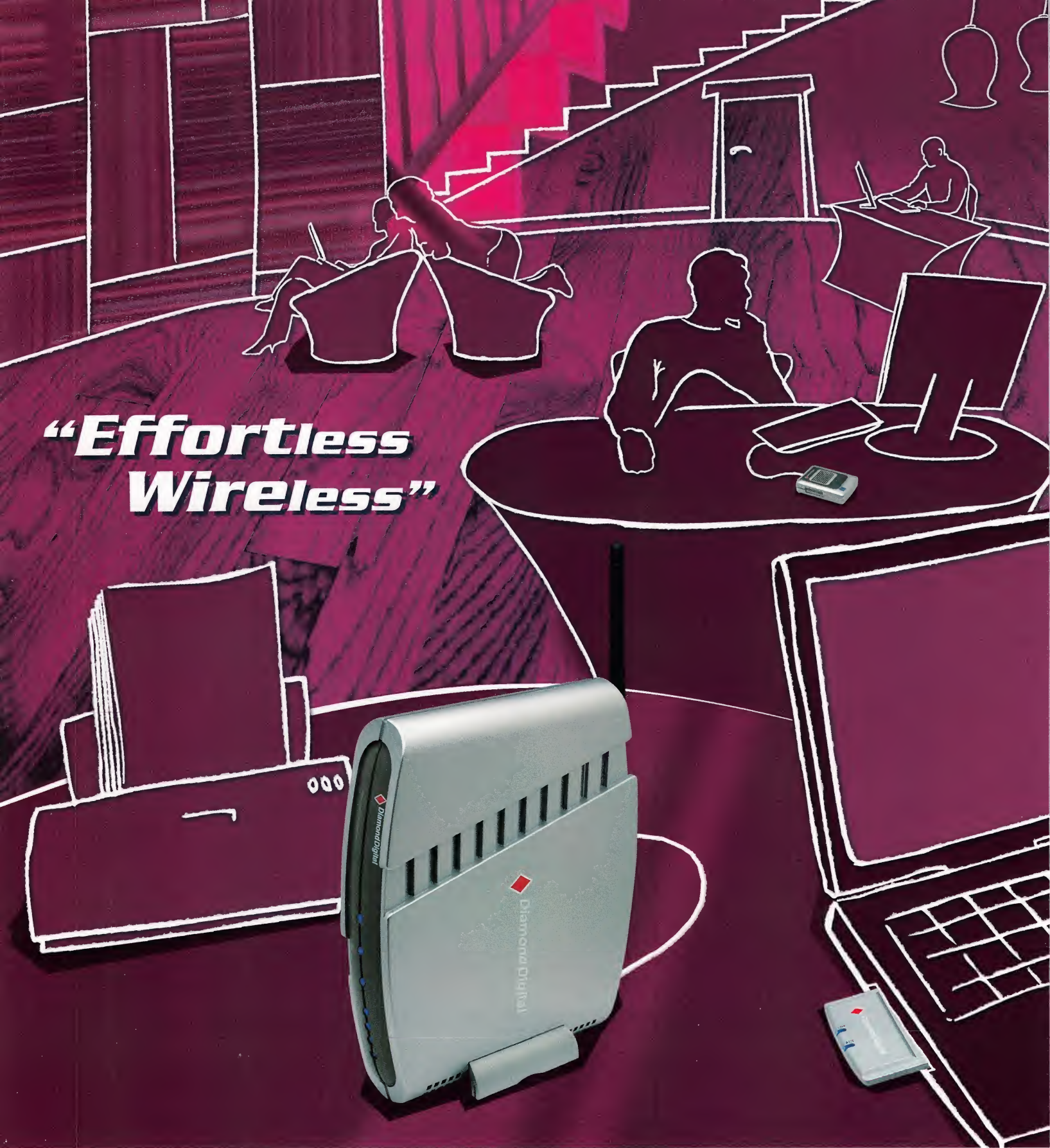
PCPP Score

At this price, there's nothing that comes close.

90



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Card Adaptor



R100 Wireless
Gateway



A101 Wireless
USB Adaptor

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Bennett Ring PowerTools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new Pentium 64,

or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests.

Actually, we used the benchmarks that competing companies both agreed upon, to help make sure our tests can't be accused of favouring one flavour of hardware over another.

Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these

applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting hardware noobs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. Check out the box below to see what components we use in our test benches.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests Aquamark3

Aquanox isn't the most popular game, but the engine behind it

makes for a great benchmarking application. We crank all the settings to the highest.

Call of Duty

OpenGL is on the verge of extinction, but there's one very important game that still uses it. Call of Duty is the premiere WWII themed shooter, and drags the Q3 engine into the 21st century with the use of pretty pixel shaders. All image quality settings are maxed.

FarCry

This is a game that illustrates just how advanced PC graphics have become. With more DirectX 9 effects than a Microsoft graphics lab, it's also one of the more intensive games around. Which makes it a great benchmark! We test with all image quality settings maxed.

UT2K4

Considering the engine is a couple of years old, UT2K4's engine still looks mighty fine. It's not quite as demanding as FarCry, but it'll still give your GPU a bit of a lashing. As well as running this with all image quality settings maxed, it's also the game we use to test antialiasing and anisotropic filtering performance.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

HIS RADEON X800 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com

ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Diamond View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com.au

Microsoft multimedia keyboard and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON X800 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com

ABIT NF7-S
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com

Microsoft multimedia keyboard and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



www.auspcmarket.com.au



www.intel.com



www.abit.com.tw



www.amd.com



www.seagate.com



www.hightech.com.hk



www.altech.com.au



www.sony.com.au



www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au

James Bannan

Decrypt

Power. It's the juice that keeps your beast humming. But you can't just plug your box into the mains and hope for the best - you need a PSU, a power supply unit, to keep your expensive equipment happy. This month, DeCrypt takes a look at the truly electric world of computer power (yes, the pun was truly that bad).

-12V Rail This is an older voltage specification used mainly by serial ports. It's become redundant through peripherals drawing less and less power through the serial port. Nowadays it's only supplied for backwards compatibility.

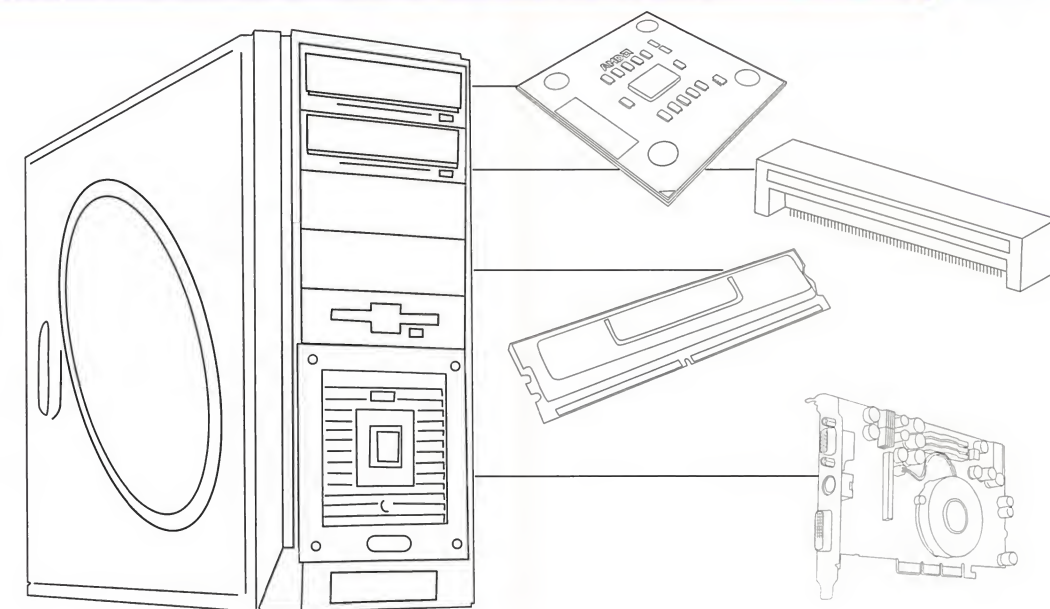
-5V Rail This was used in early systems to power floppy drives and other ISA bus-based peripherals. Like the -12V rail, it's largely redundant, but is supplied (at a greatly reduced capacity) to support older hardware.

0V Rail This is the ground voltage of the system (usually denoted with black wires), and otherwise known as the "common" voltage. It's the reference point against which all the other rails are measured.

+3.3V Rail This is the most recent addition to the power rail family. It's used almost exclusively to power the CPU, which used to be on the +5V rail. The migration to the +3.3V rail means that CPU manufacturers can gear their chips to use a dedicated and narrower voltage range, resulting in faster, more powerful processors. Doesn't that just give you a warm glow?

+5V Rail This power rail is normally used to power the motherboard, the CPU (in older systems), floppy drive, optical drive, and anything else which doesn't require +3.3V or +12V. It's the civil servant of the computing world - most of the work and none of the glory.

+5V Standby Rail This signal has an active current flow as long as the PSU has power supplied to it, regardless of whether the system is on or not. This forms the backbone



of Soft Power, where hardware/software OTHER than the power button can turn the system on (like the keyboard, mouse or network card) by altering the signal and sending a "wake up" or "shut down" message to the PSU. This is how an OS can turn off your machine without you physically powering down the PSU.

+12V Rail This rail is where the serious juice comes pumping in. It powers the hard drive motors and cooling fans. It's also passed on by the motherboard via the system bus to power connected peripherals, like PCI-cards. PSUs which are geared towards overclocking or gaming will provide two +12V rails for that extra bit of grunt and reliability - this is the new +12V 2.0 standard.

AC/DC Heady rock'n'roll and grown men dressing like schoolboys. Some would argue that computer aficionados are no less strange. However, in the world of PSUs, we're talking about alternating current/direct current. What comes in from the mains to your PSU is

240V AC - a high voltage current which travels long distances. The PSU takes that power and converts it into low-voltage DC, which is steady and constant and makes those peripherals purr. As a rule, anything requiring 12V or less to run uses DC power, so peripherals like scanners or speakers normally come with their own transformer.

Brownout A drop in the voltage level, which then returns rather than simply failing. The problem here is that peripherals are attempting to work without the necessary power, so they are more prone to malfunction and damage than just stopping.

Fan Control Similar to the +5V standby rail, the fan control signal allows the motherboard to interact directly with the voltage flow to the system fans. Systems use this in conjunction with hardware monitoring sensors to adjust fan speed based on ambient case or core CPU temperature, saving power and reducing noise (where this is an issue). It is also used by some

applications like SpeedFan in overclocking, allowing Windows to modify voltages within the OS.

Line Noise This occurs when there are small variations in the voltage delivered to the PSU. Most PSUs will cope with it, but where there are large variations, the computer circuit is shared, there is electromagnetic interference or the PSU is just a piece of crap, then the variations can be delivered to the internal devices. This is bad, because peripherals like motherboards and RAM chips need consistent, clean power. Without it, they can malfunction or even fry.

Rail This is just the name for the different voltage levels supplied by a PSU. It came about because inside the PSU is a strip or a bar which provides the actual voltage.

Surge A problem on the electrical grid which multiplies the intensity of the delivered voltage. It usually only lasts a few thousandths of a second, but that can be enough to overwhelm and damage the PSU. Surge protection is a good idea!



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XtremeOverclockers

Viper1337- CPU: Pentium4 800Mhz FSB - 3.0Ghz at 3.5Ghz
18" UMAX TelevisionTFT. Case, K/Board, Mouse: Thermaltake Lanfire
Asus Radeon 9800XT 256mb. Modem, Speakers, DVD Combo Burner
Ram: Corsair Twin-X DDR PC3200 512mb Low Lat. Kit. Win XP-Pro
HDD: Dual 80GB SATA Drives in Raid-0, 160GB Superfast Retrieval.
Asus P4C800DXE. Gamers Dream PC, Built by serious Gamers.

COBRA- CPU: Pentium4 800Mhz FSB-2.8Ghz at 3.3Ghz
DVD-BURNER. Asus Mainboard P4P800. 15" UMAX TFT Monitor
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THE BEAST



In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-53 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-53 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

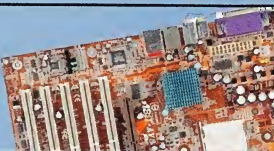
\$1449 www.amd.com



Abit AV8

We've now found a home for the FX-53 at half the cost of the last one. Not bad considering it'll perform just as quickly. Chock full of overclocking goodness, just in case you think an FX-53 is slow.

\$230 www.abit.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX1024-3200XLP

It's all about low latency baby. Unlike DDR2, this stuff is happy to cruise along at a blazing 2-2-2-5 speed. Lightspeed here we come.

\$625 www.corsairmemory.com



Zalman CNPS7000B-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

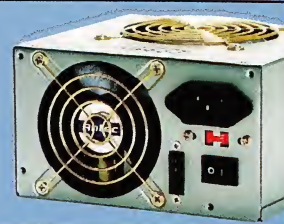
\$85 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$192 www.antec-inc.com



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

Abit RX800XT RADEON X800XT

A grand just for the video card? Hey, if it was any cheaper we'd have our readers complaining that it's not beast-worthy.

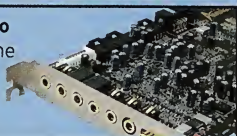
\$990 www.abit.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$479 australia.creative.com



Logitech Z680

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these Power Award winning speakers into the ports on the back. You've never heard PC speakers like these.

\$699 www.logitech.com



STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU700A Dual Layer

Dual Layer burning is the way of the future. Not only does it allow for wads of storage, we can now backup our DVD collection without compression.

\$249 www.sony.com.au



Sony 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

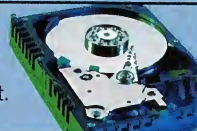
\$60 www.sony.com.au



2x Western Digital 74GB Raptor WD740D RAID 0

Sure, they're not the biggest hard drives on the planet, but they're arguably the fastest. And with a name like Raptor, it's obvious they were created just for our Beast.

\$780 www.westerndigital.com



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

17" Samsung 172x

It's might only be a 17" monitor, but it has the viewable area of a 19" CRT, at a fraction of the size. Blurring is a thing of the past due to the 12ms response time.

\$999 www.samsung.com.au



Antec P160

This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature gauges on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.

\$235 www.antec-inc.com



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier than this delectable combo.

\$170 www.microsoft.com.au



Panasonic PT-AE500E

Who needs a piddly monitor when this baby will throw a high resolution (1280 x 720) image 2.5m wide across the closest wall? The ultimate gaming experience.

\$3,899 www.panasonic.com.au



BEAST VALUE:

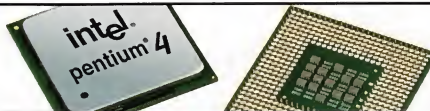
\$11441

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for a very reasonable price. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.8GHz "C"

at 3.3GHz
This speedy little processor has the benefit of being overlockable to around the 3.3GHz mark at least. Hyperthreading support is a treat.
\$316 www.intel.com



Abit AI7

An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the AI7 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again.
\$182 www.abit.com.tw



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Sure, this combo isn't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless, making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch.
\$170 www.microsoft.com.au



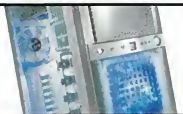
Antec NeoPower 480

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with customisable cables, thus lessening the airflow destroying clutter we're used to in the past? Nothing, that's what.
\$192 www.antec-inc.com



Antec SUPERLANBOY

An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window.
\$165 www.antec-inc.com



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2

Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of ridiculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere \$416? Not us, that's for sure.
\$416 www.corsairmemory.com



ELSA FAKCIX X80 Pro 256MB

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. We've made the move up to the new X800 Pro chipsets, as the 9800XT has been phased out.
\$750 www.elsa.com.tw



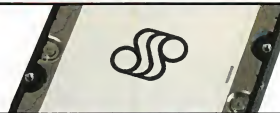
Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve?
\$68 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain.
\$146 www.seagate.com



Creative SB Audigy LS

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.
\$109 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 5.1 5200

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers.
\$147 australia.creative.com



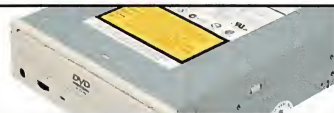
Sony Internal 8X DVD+/-RW Drive

This single layer DVD burner is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.
\$185 www.sony.com.au



Sony 16X DVD-ROM

Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Now you've got no excuse not to subscribe to PCPP's DVD edition. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't.
\$60 www.sony.com.au



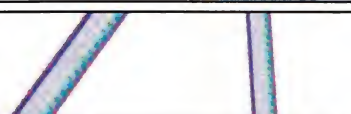
19" Samsung 957 Dynafat

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 12ms LCD this big costs this much.
\$499 www.samsung.com.au



4x Antec Internal Illuminate

Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination.
\$176 www.antec-inc.com



MUTANT VALUE: \$3581

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of us who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

AMD -Athlon XP

2600+ Barton
The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier
\$157 www.amd.com



Abit NF7-S

nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better
www.abit.com.tw
\$165



Antec SuperLanboy

Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap.
\$225
www.antec-inc.com



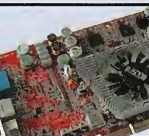
512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market.
\$186
www.corsairmemory.com



Elsa FALCOX 980FX

Yes, a 9800 Pro in a budget system. Holy shit batman.
\$430
www.elsa.com.tw



80GB Seagate IDE

Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable.
\$115
www.seagate.com



Creative Inspire 2500 2.1

Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic!
\$89
australia.creative.com



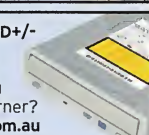
Sony 16X DVD-ROM

Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable.
\$60
www.samsung.com.au



Sony Internal 8X DVD+/-RW Drive

Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a DVD burner?
\$185 www.samsung.com.au



17" Samsung 753DFX

To think 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the technology of the future.
\$229 www.samsung.com.au



Black Microsoft Optical Value Pack

Not content with owning your OS world, MS are now ruling the I/O roost.
\$55 www.kmepc.com

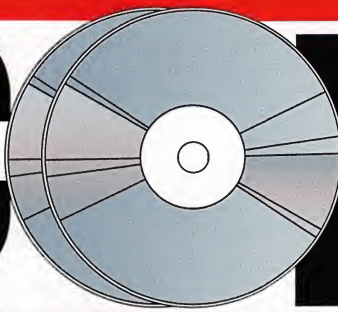


beastie value: \$1950

So, you want one of these three fine machines? Luckily, all of these components are available at
Altech Computers
www.altech.com.au
02 9735 5655



THE DISC



REQUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at cdgod@next.com.au or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016



Some months it's a bit of challenge to fill the disc with quality stuff. This month I'm glad to say isn't one of them. There were some quality demos available, that we had trouble fitting them all onto the disc. Apart from the demos, there's the normal selection of mods, patches and utilities. We've also got a sweet episode of anime in Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex.

The titles of the playable game demos on the disc this month include Colin McRae Rally 2005, Evil Genius, Richard Burn's Rally, Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, FIFA Soccer 2005, Conflict: Vietnam, Top Spin, Tribes: Vengeance and Call of Duty: United Offensive. Also included is a demo that a lot of the people have requested, and that is Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault.

The mods section once again features several mods for Doom 3. Also included this month is the

Battlefield: Vietnam World War II mod. This modification allows gamers to play in three Pacific Theatre maps from Battlefield: 1942 in Battlefield: Vietnam.

The disc also includes several game movies to watch. The intro video for Call of Duty: United Offensive is full of action. There are also several patches to update your favourite games to the latest versions. The UT 2004 patch will update your game to version 3323.

On a sad note, the Bunker is no more. Our #1 fan, ROM has decided to retire the bunker. I'd like to thank ROM for all the hard work he has put in.

That's all for this month!!

Amos Hong
Disc Master
cdgod@next.com.au

DVD CONTENTS

DEMOS

Call of Duty: United Offensive
Colin McRae Rally 2005
Conflict: Vietnam
Evil Genius
FIFA Soccer 2005
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault
Richard Burn's Rally
Top Spin



Tribes: Vengeance
Warhammer 40,000:
Dawn of War

EXTRAS

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex [DVD Episode]

TRAILERS

CoD: United Offensive
Evil Genius
FIFA Soccer 2005



GTA: San Andreas
Top Spin
Victory '04 - Episode 4

PATCHES

Halo v1.0-1.5
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising v1.3.1.15
Savage: Battle for Newerth v2.00E
UT 2004 v3323

MODS

BF: Vietnam WWII [BF:Vietnam]
Allied Marine Squadmates [Doom 3]
Nitro Gore [Doom 3]
Four Weapons Flashlight [Doom 3]



UTILITIES

Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.9 8.05 - f
DirectX 9.0c - f
DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.2.1 - f

Windows Media Player 9 - f
WinRAR 3.3 - s
WinZip 9.0 - s



WALLPAPERS

Thanks to the guys at GameWallpapers.com who have supplied us with these wallpapers, this month we have wallpapers for games like Colin McRae Rally 2005, Pro Evolution Soccer 4 and Resident Evil Outbreak.

CD CONTENTS



CD1

DEMOS

Evil Genius
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion
Richard Burns Rally

TRAILERS

Call of Duty: United Offensive
Evil Genius



GTA: San Andreas
Top Spin

CD2

Call of Duty: United Offensive
Conflict: Vietnam
FIFA Soccer 2005

PATCHES

Halo v1.0-1.5
UT 2004 v3323



WALLPAPERS

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NEXT
MONTH



TAKE 2



Diet Master XP

For only a fool fails to fear food

The boots and I enter the room with great caution. We expect the roof to cave in at any moment, or flames to leap from wildly twisting gas pipes, or some kind of bomb to go off, or flesh-eating locusts to swarm from the chimney. But, unaccountably, nothing happens. This is the first time since... since possibly ever. Could this be the first normal Yellow Boots experience?

In the end, the boots and I are just left smiling and shaking hands with a terribly thin but otherwise pleasant young man by the name of Johnny Fammin. Johnny has called us to his pleasant suburban home in a part of Melbourne that has since asked to remain nameless, to show us his new game Diet Master XP.

"For me, controlling what you eat is very important," says Fammin. "We hear so much about diets on television these days, and the focus is always the same - it's the dieter who is the failure, who lacks self control, who is unable to complete the diet or, more usually, is unable to invest in some exercise along with their low-carb celery."

Fammin thinks it will be more interesting for the player to take the role of a young up-and-coming fad diet executive, tasked with making their latest diet the talk of the town, city, country, world and internet.

"Think Rollercoaster Tycoon, except with diets. You literally build diets, designing them from a selection of foods, and you balance their calorie content with how much extra stuff you think you can get away with making your customers do. For instance, an ultra-low calorie diet is great, since the dieters won't have to do as much exercise, but the sheer lack of food is more likely to drive them back to midnight junk bingeing. On the other hand, if your calorie count is too high and you stipulate too much additional exercise as a requirement, your lazy-arse customers will just get fatter and fatter and eventually sue you for negligence."

It's truly a difficult balance. Fammin goes on to explain the use of drugs.

"I've written a speed module. You'll either be able to bribe someone in big pharma to supply you with prescription methamphetamine, make your own from old Sudafed tablets, or just buy bathtubs full of the stuff from your local bikie gang. Then you can feed it to your customers and watch them bounce off the walls and shed kilos while bopping along to old Ministry of Sound compilations."

Fammin's graphics engine can best be described as "lean", with a subtle palette of fleshy colours that recreate all the wild shades people turn when they start compulsively starving themselves.

"Because inevitably some of your customers will start to develop anorexia or bulimia or something more obscure like that potato thing Sarah Jessica Parker had. It's up to you to decide whether you want to spend money on medical



treatment for these poor people, or actually photograph them for before-and-after sections in your company brochure."

There's something about the way Fammin is so excited about his game, and the way he's really, really almost creepily thin, that makes me think there's more at stake here than making a packet in a crowded and floundering PC games industry.

"What's the real story here Fammin," I ask, pressing the point along with my forefinger into his bony chest.

His eyes roll this way and that. "No story, nothing at all. It's just a game. And in fact it's finished. Look, I'm about to upload to my website for free. Free. Anyone can have it. It's my last gift to the world."

"Last gift?" I ask, face bathed in the sickly glow of the green flashing "OK" button on his FTP client interface. "What do you mean last gift?"

"Nothing!" he cries, and then, as I probably should have known, the door explodes.

A creature enters the room. A great mass, a huge, pulsating, sweating, mountain of a woman,

titanic in every sense of the word. She has worked at this. She is a new species.

"Johnathan!" she booms. "Dinner time!" He grabs the front of my Gundam Wing T-shirt. "Please," he begs. "It's too late for me. I've hidden from her for too long. She's... she's going to start feeding me now. Please, press the button! Press the button!"

She - either his wife or his mother - hauls herself across the room and grabs Fammin by the neck. "Come on boy!" she booms. "Chicken for starters! We've got to put some meat on those bones!"

"The button!" shrieks Fammin as he is dragged away into the dark, beyond the shattered door, beyond sanity, beyond any hope of redemption.

The boots and I regard the flashing green button with more than a little disquiet. I move my hand toward the mouse, but hesitate. I move again, again I hesitate.

"Oh screw this," I splutter. "Let's go and get a hamburger."

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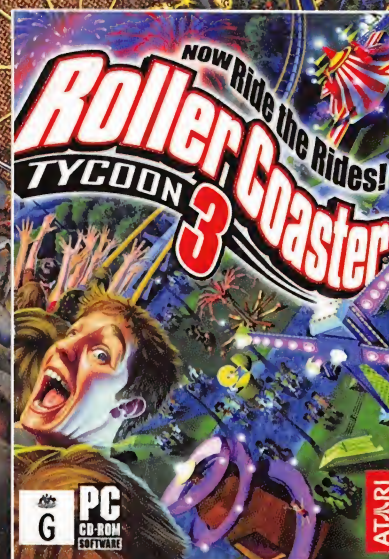
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